The Past and The Future

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The Past and The Future

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Summary

Part Four of the AU where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

He sees Will watching him, a fond smile on his face.

Hannibal says, "Sometimes I think you already know everything that I haven't told you."

"But I don't," Will says, as though to reassure him. "I just know how you feel about it."

Chapter 1

Hannibal waits in the car while Will goes into the hotel lobby.

He shows the man at the desk the same false ID that he used to get the rental car with which they've replaced the one they stole, and he checks his scarf to make sure its hiding the bruise Dolarhyde left around his throat while the clerk copies the ID on an outdated xerox machine. Will requests a single key card and offers a mild, forgettable smile when it's handed to him.

Once they are in the room, Will goes into the bathroom with the bag of supplies that he'd picked up at a 24-hour Wal-Mart about two hours and some hundred miles back. He showers, gripping the railing tightly when a wave of dizziness nearly lands him on his ass in the tub. The hot water leeches off some of the chill, but it comes back almost as soon as he turns off the tap.

He fiddles with his hair in the mirror, ruffling the damp curls and thinking about his options. Taking a pair of scissors from its packaging, Will chops at his hair, calculatedly, to make it look messier. Then he blows air out of his mouth in a sigh.

Will doesn't care for the person he sees in the mirror, sans his usual grooming routine. The butchered, wild hair and two-day stubble make him look scruffy and disreputable and somehow smaller than he really is, and Will imagines that the person looking back at him is poorly bred and in possession of an unpleasant sort of skittish, base cunning. The sallowness of his skin and the dark circles around his eyes does nothing to redeem him, nor does the bruise under his chin.

This isn't who he wants to be.

Will reaches for the clippers with a sense of resignation.

The buzz cut makes his face look round and babyish, and he braces himself when he comes out the bathroom.

Hannibal's expression when he sees Will is horror, quickly mastered and hidden away. Still, he can't disguise his distress completely. "What did you do?" he asks, and there is a note of outrage in his voice.

"What I had to do," Will says, trying manfully to hide his own displeasure behind hyperbole. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror that hangs across from the bed and notes unhappily how undersized his head looks in relationship to his neck.

"You're next," Will tells him. "But relax. I think that I can do better by you."

The hair dye smells abominable, and even after Hannibal has rinsed it out and applied the conditioner that came in the package it still burns in his nose.

There's some consolation in having Will so near him, even if he doesn't especially trust him to utilize the scissors with any degree of skill. "Use a lot of deep conditioner from here on out," Will is telling him. "And don't put product in it after you shower. We want it to be soft and feathery - that change'll get you even further than a new cut."

Will uses a comb to sweep Hannibal's hair back rather than parting it at the side, then he trims the excess, framing Hannibal's face with soft, flowing lines that taper gently at the base of his neck. The effect is almost but not quite feminine, and it gentles Hannibal's face even as the new dark color makes his eyes appear even more deeply set than they really are.

There is something about his own reflection that moves Hannibal. He cannot at first understand why, but then he thinks, *Will had the opportunity to change me and he choose to make me look softer than I am.*

Will crawls into the bed behind him and curls his arms around Hannibal's shoulders. He props his chin on Hannibal's shoulder and looks into the mirror with him, and bristley hair on the side of Will's head scratches Hannibal's cheek.

"Look how beautiful you are," Will says.

His hand starts to roam then, snaking its way down Hannibal's side and across his thigh, tracing the edge of the towel that's tied around Hannibal's waist.

"What you doing?" Hannibal asks curiously.

"I want you," Will tells him. "I want you to know how much I want you."

"You lost three pints of blood, Will. You couldn't get an erection right now to save your life. If by some miracle you did, you'd black out."

Which incidentally, Hannibal thinks, he might do anyway.

"So what?" Will says carelessly. "I can still get you off, Hannibal. That's just as good for me. Maybe even better."

Hannibal lifts his arm and Will slides under it, leans in against him. It's his left hand that's busy now, fingers working their way under the hem of the towel where it is knotted just below his navel. His fingers are cold as ice.

"What do you say?" Will asks.

"I adore you," Hannibal says, and ducks his head to the crown of Will's newly-prickly head. "But I want you to get some rest, all right? We both need sleep, Will."

Will sighs with elaborate disappointment. "Alright, have it your way."

However good-naturedly Will took his objections, Hannibal thinks that he is perhaps feeling rebuked, because when he lays down he leaves a considerable amount of space between himself and Hannibal. Hannibal has learned not to crowd in on Will, however much he wants to, and he takes this quietly.

It's odd, how fragile Will can get after dark. Hannibal thinks that it is perhaps because he is used to being alone at this time of night.

Now, Will speaks into the darkness. "You mad at me?"

"For what?"

"I dunno."

"I'm just tired, Will."

For a long time, quiet is the only answer.

He’s almost asleep when Will says, “Hannibal? I’m cold.”

Hannibal turns onto his side to face Will and says, “Come here then,” and Will moves in close and rests his forehead against Hannibal’s clavicle.

The way Will is shivering now is somehow distinct from the overwhelmed and anxious trembling that still overtakes him sometimes when Hannibal touches him, but Hannibal still moves cautiously as he curls his body around him, trying to transfer some of his own heat to Will.

“This is all right?” Hannibal asks Will, but Will is already asleep.

Hannibal is about to follow him into sleep when a memory surfaces: himself, clinging tightly to his sister to try to keep her warm while they huddle together in the frigid darkness, waiting.

He’d forgotten. The shock of remembering now is such that it leaves him too numb to even begin to parse how it makes him feel, but he lies awake with the memory for a long time.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will closes himself in the bathroom with a burner phone, but through the flimsy door Hannibal can hear him talking to Margot in a low, weary voice.

He's in there for a long time, and Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed and flips between news channels, following the news scrawls and reading the subtitles because he's muted the volume. Every few minutes he gets up and goes to the plate glass window to peer through the blinds, though he knows, really, if the FBI were to close in on them they would not approach from any angle to could be viewed from the window.

Hannibal listens to fragments of Will's side of the conversation, to him reassuring Margot again and again that he is fine, that he is sorry to have frightened her, that he can explain everything and that no, he is in no danger.

Hannibal can tell that she doesn't believe him.

Margot raps softly on the hotel room door and it opens to admit her, Will standing before her on the other side, rumpled and pallid and worn, and she sees the way that he tilts his head up, just the slightest bit, to draw her attention to bruises ringing his throat like a chain of red and purple flowers.

Margot has bore similar gaudy ornamentations in her time, and she knows that Will knows it.

"You're a pitiful sight," she tells him. Knowing, of course, that she is seeing what he wants her to see. Poor Will, with his gentle smile and big heart, worn ragged and ruined for the sake of helping her.

He smiles weakly and looks past her. "Where's Thomas?" he asks.

"Will," she says, watching him carefully, "you can't have thought that I'd bring him here."

Margot expects to be lied to. She knows that he is already working to manipulate her.

But she believes, despite everything else, that the grief that comes into his eyes when she says that is real. And she is sorry for that pain, even if it changes nothing about what she has to do.

Will swallows hard and says, "No, I suppose not."

When she looks past Will, she sees Hannibal stand to vacate the only chair in the room, offering it to her. Margot eyes him carefully but sits on the edge of the bed instead. It's closer

to the door, and that makes her feel safer, though she knows realistically that if any of this goes badly the chances of her being able to escape them both are minuscule.

Hannibal does not try to approach her. He sits back down in the chair, where he will remain until all of this is almost over. Will sits on the edge of the bed nearer to Hannibal, which is good because Margot only has to turn her body slightly to watch them both.

Which one? she wonders, though of course she's already figured it out.

"I'm so glad that you're here," Will tells her. "I want to explain again how sorry I am for all of this. I didn't want to frighten you that way, make you worry that I was dead, it's just that it had to look good or else -"

"Will."

"I couldn't just let Hannibal hang, not for the likes of Mason. You understand that."

He has a funny way, Margot has noticed many times before, of turning things to make you think or feel the way he wants you to, without ever actually lying. He's said nothing that's untrue - or even, she thinks, especially insincere - so far, but the danger is in the things that he doesn't say.

"Will," she says again.

"I'm sorry - I keep running on. I just don't want you to misunderstand, Margot. I don't want this mess to ruin things between us."

"I don't want to talk about Mason, or about the… stunt that you pulled, faking your death."

"I understand," Will says. "Tommy - I wanted to talk about him too, what this situation means -"

"The bodies, Will," she cuts in, and sees him wince as though she's said something terribly impolite. "It's not just Mason. They're linking his killing up to all sorts of others. It has to do with how the bodies were displayed, if I understand the matter correctly."

"But that's nonsense, Margot. They don't have the slightest bit of evidence. It's just Freddie Lounds inventing trouble. She's had it out for Hannibal for years, you know."

Margot fixes her eyes on Hannibal when she says, "Hannibal didn't kill those people," and sees, from watching him, that she is right. He does not meet her eyes, but his shoulders straighten, as though a weight has fallen from them, and he lifts his chin defiantly.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Will insists, his words coming quickly. "It's all a load of horseshit. He didn't have anything to do with it."

Margot has spent most of her life swallowing her words, but never with Will. She doesn't intend to start now, especially so soon after she's gained her freedom.

"I know who killed them, Will."

There is in Hannibal a tensing of the body, muscles tightening to spring even as his eyes flick towards Will, seeking his cue.

Will, however, doesn't seem to react at all. "Do you?" he asks mildly. She had hoped that he would feel ashamed, but there's nothing like that reflecting back at her in his pale eyes.

"I wanted to be able to blame Hannibal," she says. "It would have been so much easier, Will, to believe that some violent stranger had somehow taken hold of you and your life. That's what I wanted to think - the prospect was terrifying, but I wanted to believe that more than I did the alternative.

"But he's got a look to him that I recognize. It's the look of someone who knows the truth and who knows that they won't be believed if they tell it. I know what that's like."

"I know you do."

"For a long time you were the only one who believed me. That was a great help. I don't know if I could have survived Mason without you."

"I'm glad, Margot. I always did the best that I could by you."

She doesn't discount this - she knows it's true, even if it no longer matters.

"How do you feel, knowing?" Will asks her.

"More acutely aware of everything that is wrong with me, Will. I was inured to violence at too early an age… I'm so used to it that I don't worry about other people getting hurt, people I don't know - not the way that I should. Mainly, I've been trying to decide if this means that you're a danger to me, or to Thomas."

"Often times," Will says, "our problems stem from being forced into molds that don't fit. It's natural that you to focus on survival, given the life you've led."

Margot studies Will. "You care about Hannibal."

It isn't exactly a question, but Will treats it as one. "I do, Margot. I love him."

"Then how can you make him carry your lies for you?"

Hannibal breaks in. "Will hasn't made me do anything. They have me dead to rights for Mason. This plan is my best shot at staying free, and he's given up everything to make it work."

Margot looks at him, sitting there with his fists balled in his lap. "You believe that," she observes.

"If they knew that we were traveling together, we'd be easy to spot. If I was traveling alone, I'd have to show my face to every hotel clerk and gas station attendant along the way, but Will's been handling those exchanges. As long as the feds and the media thinks Will's dead, he's protecting me."

Margot considers that. She supposes it might be the honest truth - or, at least, that they might both believe it to be - but it is immaterial to why she is here, and she lets the topic drop.

“Mason’s secrets started to unfold within hours of them finding the body,” she says, looking back to Will. “There was no way to stop it happening, and I haven’t tried. I’ve got lawyers and specialist in child trauma on it, to establish the validity of claims and offer settlements. The other people he hurt - they deserve something better than financial compensation, but that’s what I have to give them and I don’t begrudge it.

“It’s a taint on the family, though, having this all out in the public, and it’s going to follow Thomas.”

Will’s always had a talent for completing her thoughts. “And how much worse is it going to be, if the truth comes out about what I’ve done and they connect him back to me? That’s half the reason I can’t be caught. I’m trying to protect you and Tommy as much as Hannibal and myself.”

“You should have told me about this, Will, before I agreed to have a child with you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that boy, Margot,” and Margot sees that she’s frightened him and that he is frightened because he believes that she may treat her boy differently having learned this about his sire, and that in doing so cause him damage.

She is, for the first time since she came here, truly angry. Part of her wants to rail against him for suggesting that she might be so poor a mother as that, but another part feels caught out - exposed. Margot comes from people who put great stock in bloodlines, and she believes fundamentally that her own blood contains all the composite parts to make another man such as Mason or their father.

“Not a thing,” she agrees, fiercely, because she is proud of her happy, sweet-natured boy. “But that’s just dumb luck, isn’t it? I thought I was giving him a better chance, picking a father who I knew - who I thought I knew - to be so empathetic and decent, that it might cancel out whatever filth is floating around in my own gene pool. But instead I loaded the gun against him twice, and you knew that and let me do it anyway.”

“Socialization is nine tenths of who any of us are, Margot. He’s good because you’re doing a good job by him.”

“I’m done talking with you about this.”

Margot stands, and as she does so she reaches into her bag and takes out a brown envelope. She thinks first to hand it to him, but then she decides that she doesn’t want to get that close, so she drops it on the bed between them instead.

“That’s the deeds for the safe houses you set up for Tommy and I. The keys and title for the car you asked for is in there too, under the name you wanted. Some cash.”

She sees his pride bristle up at that, on top of everything else, but she doesn’t want to argue about it. “It’ll cost me more than money if you’re caught, Will.”

He accepts that, at least. “Thank you, Margot.”

“You won’t contact me again - not me or Thomas."

"You can't take the boy's father from him," Hannibal says.

"Thomas is not my son," Will tells him. He looks down at his hands as he speaks, and his voice is quiet but carries the note of a man being asked to repeat some basic fact one time too many. "Not legally and not within the agreement that I and Margot made. My interactions with Thomas have always taken place at her pleasure, Hannibal."

"That's correct," Margot says. "And I am withdrawing my consent for you to see him.

"If you’re dead, Will, then stay dead. Don't bring trouble down on us.”

Will looks up at her, and Margot feels a distant sort of outrage that, even knowing everything she does, seeing the hurt in his eyes still causes her such hurt in return.

"I understand," he says.

What strength was in Will deflates as soon as the door closes behind Margot. He looks limp, wrung out, torn down. It reminds Hannibal of how Will was when they were in the basement, just before he caved in and let Hannibal free to savage him.

Hannibal stands and goes after Margot.

Chapter End Notes

You might have noticed that the chapter count went up considerably between this update and the last.

I don't want to spoil anything, but dramatic life changes are coming for our boys.

Chapter 3

“Wait,” Hannibal says, walking quickly to close the space between himself and Margot.

He reaches for her shoulder and in the same instant she turns on him, and Hannibal sees the taser in her hand.

It’s no wimpy little low volt stun gun, marketed more to provide peace of mind to anxious women than actual security. It’s police issue and Hannibal knows that she can take him down with it with a push of a button.

“That’s smart,” he says, falling back a step. “Good.”

“You shouldn’t be out here,” she tells him, her voice pitched low. “Someone might see you.”

He ignores this. “Why did you treat Will like that?”

There is, Hannibal has noticed, a slight lag to Margot’s expressions, as though she pauses to evaluate how each new feeling will be perceived by others before she dares to make it visible. It reminds him, in a way, of himself, though he thinks her hesitation is driven by a different sort of caution against exposing that which might be used against her.

“Those people he killed,” she says, “can you say with any certainty that they were all bad people?”

And Hannibal, who knows - who has understood for almost as long as he has really understood anything at all about Will - that his capriciousness often outstrips his vigilante streak in profoundly ugly ways, tells the truth as he understands it; “All of those that he left to be found had it coming, just like Mason did.”

He sees Margot’s throat working, almost imperceivably, swallowing around the shock as she works to face up to the implications what he’s told her - that there is even more blood on Will's hands than she imagined. He remembers why he’d liked her so much when they had met under better circumstances; she’s a tough one.

Margot has a particular way of poking cautiously around the edge of things and waiting to see what happens. Hannibal likes it - it reminds him of Will, though there’s more fear underpinning Margot’s approach. Perhaps more anger, too.

She does that now. “What is it like, being with him?” Margot asks, and anyone less perceptive might have believed that she was simply curious.

“It’s exactly like you said before,” he tells her, after no more than a moment’s thought. “I’ve never shied away from facing up to what I am, but since I’ve gotten to know Will I’m more keenly aware of everything that’s wrong with me than I’ve ever been, and as well I am *acutely* aware of his own flaws. But Margot, I don’t experience any of that as a negative thing.

“It’s an *incalculable relief* to really be understood by someone else - to have him look and really see me, all the way to the core, all of the worst things and the best too - and to be loved still, not despite all of the parts that make me who I am but because of them. Do you see?”

He knows that she does, despite herself. Hannibal can see her longing towards the same thing that he’s found. He hopes that she will get it someday, too.

Margot is more open in her intent now. “But how can you be sure that you understand him in turn? He’s like still water, Hannibal. I’ve known him for nearly a decade, and I still can’t guess at what else is hiding underneath.”

Hannibal tries not to show how much hearing this observation from someone else thrills him. *That's Will,* he thinks. *Moody and secretly fragile and oh so dangerous.*

Mine.

“I know him well enough to know how he feels. He cares about you, Margot, down into his bones, and he loves that child.”

“But not enough to keep his hands clean.”

“No,” Hannibal says, lifting his chin; he will not, he has decided, defend Will in this regard. “I don’t think he’d stop even if I asked him to. I don’t think he can, not after all of this time.”

“We’re all three of us ruined, Hannibal, don’t you agree? I don't know what happened to you - I'm not sure that I'd want to know - but I know scar tissue when I see. We are irreversibly fucked up and have been since we were too young to have any say in it.” Hannibal does not answer, but he cocks his head, waiting intently for her to go on. “But I’ve always felt that it is my duty to do what I can to mitigate the ways in which my own damage causes harm to others, especially people who don’t deserve it.”

“That’s been my position on the matter, more or less,” Hannibal allows. He does not speak about how eroded that position has become as of late, how little he’s come to fear that the ground might crumble beneath his feet and send him tumbling down to whatever waits for him at rock bottom.

“But you still came out there to ask me to forgive him.”

“No,” Hannibal says. “I didn't. I do think that you should… work on accepting that this is something about Will that isn’t going to change, even if it takes some time, so you can still enjoy what’s good about him. There’s a lot of good to him, Margot, and it’s real and it’s so sincere that it’s almost simple. You’ll be hard pressed to find another friend who cares so much or who is so willing to do anything he can for you, if you let him go.

“That’s not why I came out here, though.

“Listen - I helped you. Your boy is safe because of what I did, isn’t that so?”

Margot is not begrudging so much as suspicious. “We both know it is.”

“So then you owe me something. *Quid pro quo* .”

“What else do you want?” she asks, and there is in her voice, unless he imagines it, something dismissive. It reminds Hannibal of the gulf that exists between the two of them - between Will’s own so recently surrendered inheritance and the billions that Margot has come into, for that matter.

It brings to mind the way that Mason begged. The man seemed sure that if he could hit upon something that Hannibal wanted badly enough then he could be induced to stop the work of his knife, but the only bribes that Mason seemed able to conceive of boiled down to offering Hannibal things or persons to fuck or consume or to kill in Mason’s stead.

Mostly, he offered Hannibal money and things that might be had with money, and even after they had reached the point of no return - where there was so little left intact for Mason that his survival would have been nigh on impossible even if Hannibal had deigned to stop, which of course he did not - he remained desperately and incoherently convinced that he could use money to make his problems disappear.

Certainly, that had always worked for him before. Hannibal wonders if Margot will become the same way, now that she holds the purse strings to the dynasty, but then he wonders if he is being unfair. He was not raised to respect hoarded wealth, and often he still feels himself to be on the back foot among these people that he’s fallen in with, people so rich that they trade cars and houses between one another as personal favors.

Hannibal says, “Keep my dog for me. Take care of her - or else, hire someone to do it for you - until we find someplace safe and I can send for her.”

“I saw her in the crate. That’s one of Will’s hunting dogs. He’s shown me pictures.”

“This isn’t for Will - she’s my dog. She belongs to me and I want you to watch her for me.”

“Why?”

There are a lot ways to interpret that question, and Hannibal chooses the one that suits him. “I don’t have anyone else that I can ask, and it’s too dangerous to travel with her. Dogs attract a lot of attention, and she’s especially distinctive looking, and I’m still not sure whether or not the feds realize I have her along with me.

“And she’s still healing. Will told you about the Dragon, didn't her?" Margot nods silently. "The trip has already been hard enough on her already - you saw how quiet she was. She needs someplace to rest.

“If you do that for me then we’ll be square. I don't think I'm asking for much.”

Hannibal goes back inside and gets Beth and her things. Will doesn’t ask what he’s doing and he doesn’t try to stop him. He supposes Will has worked it out already.

Hannibal watches through the hole in the blinds as Margot takes her phone out and makes a quick call. The Bentley pulls up and parks in front of her just a couple minutes later, so Hannibal figures she must have had the driver waiting somewhere nearby to pick her up, since she has left the car she came in behind for them.

He sees the driver load the crate, bag of food and the cotton sack with her bowls, toys and meds into the car, then he watches Margot pick the half grown pup up in her arms, and moving carefully to avoid hurting her injured side, lower her into the backseat. Margot slides in next to Beth, and before the driver closes the door behind her Hannibal sees her hand go to the crown of Beth's head and stroke the fur there.

That's a good sign, he thinks.

Will is sitting at the desk, looking over the papers that Margot gave him. He's stacked the cash neatly to one side, twenty bundles of one hundred $100 notes, the mustard colored currency bands marked with *$10,000* printed in the center.

"I'm going to put my arms around you," he tells Will, and Will says "Alright," without looking up, so Hannibal does so, leaning in to rest his chin on Will's shoulder so he can look down at what Will's looking at.

"She'll come around, I think," he tells Will. "You took her by surprise and the fear got the upper hand. Difficult to blame her."

"I know it is."

"Beth will be safe with her, won't she?"

"Fine, I think. There's no lack of room for her to stretch her legs, at least. And Mason was the only person in that household who wasn't trustworthy with small animals." Will sighs. "That was a smart idea you had, and I know that the dog was a dead giveaway and that it wasn't safe for any of us to have her with us on the road, least of all her, but I wish…"

"I know it," Hannibal says. He tightens his arms around Will and sways, a soothing rocking motion. After a little while, he says, "I kept the matter of the dog separate from you and the boy and everything else. I thought she might tell me no otherwise. But it's an in - an excuse to stay in touch."

Will turns his head and pecks Hannibal on the cheek. "Did anyone ever tell you that you are a talented manipulator?"

"If they notice that they're being manipulated and tell you about it, that means that you aren't very good at it, doesn't it?"

Leaning against Will's back as he is, Hannibal feels the shaky bark of laughter in his own chest.

"She knew what I was doing, though - not a lot gets past her, does it? I think she was looking for a rational excuse to soften her stance, if only by a hair. I offered that and she took it."

“I don’t know what I’m going to do if Margot won’t have me back as a friend,” Will says, sinking back into despondency. “The idea of her hating me makes me want to tear my skin off.”

“Just give it time.” Hannibal pauses, smiles ruefully down at Will’s close cropped hair. “I’m struck by the irony of my giving advice about friendships, given how badly my last one ended.”

As Will reaches back to squeeze his forearm comfortingly, Hannibal is struck by a sudden, tardy realization; *I will never see Bev again,* Hannibal thinks to himself, but he’s wrong about that.

“What do you have there?” Hannibal asks.

“These are the deeds to the safe houses I set up for Margot and the boy. They aren’t anything especially fancy, but I wanted her to have them on hand in case they needed to disappear very thoroughly very quickly. Of course, she won’t need them now so she’s given them back to me. The keys are still in the envelope.

“You pick where we go.” Will lays the papers side by side on the table. “Aberdeen, Washington or New Orleans.”

It is obvious, of course, which option Will would prefer - he can’t go home again, never again, but New Orleans is only a few hours outside of his old haunts. And even without looking at a map, Hannibal knows that the drive to Washington state will be two or three times longer than the trip to Louisiana. That’s significant, with Will so badly bled out and worn down.

And too, there had been something compelling about Louisiana for Hannibal; the soft droop of Spanish moss and the languid heat and the way that a sort of ineffable violence seemed to lurk between every paving stone and shade tree, the weight of a history foreign to him - but also, he had heard it said that New Orleans is in many ways more like a European city than any other place in the New World, and the contrast of that fascinates him and leaves him eager to learn if there is any truth to it.

New Orleans is the path of least resistance and the more appealing option, and those two facts are a large part of what makes it feel so dangerous.

“I’ve wanted to see New Orleans for years,” Hannibal says, “but Will, isn’t there a chance that you might spotted by someone who knows you?”

Will agrees reluctantly. “For a grand old city it’s awful small.”

“Aberdeen, then,” Hannibal says, and sighs.

Will reaches up and folds his hands around Hannibal’s. His hands are no less icy than they were the night before, and that worries Hannibal all over again.

“We’ll go to New Orleans someday,” he promises. “I’ll take you there, after this all blows over.”

It’s a fantasy, Hannibal knows, but he decides to try to believe it anyway.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal stares into the mouth of the tunnel like a man looking down the barrel of a gun. “I don’t want to go in there,” he says.

Will has been aware of Hannibal’s building anxiety for the last twenty minutes or so, as the traffic inched forward towards the tunnel entrance, and now as the shadow of it looms nearly close enough to touch the hood of the SUV that Margot gave them, the fear comes close to the surface of Hannibal’s face in a way that Will has rarely seen before.

He knows at a glance that attempting to rationalize will do no good. Telling Hannibal that the traffic jam won’t last forever and that the tunnel is not that long and is, after all, entirely safe, won’t do any good, because clearly all of this is beside the point.

“Cross the median and turn around,” Will says. The Cayenne would have no trouble with that, Will knows. “We’ll find another route.”

But Hannibal shakes his head. “Cop behind us,” he says, and Will looks in the rearview window and sees the police car, about three cars back.

The traffic starts to move again, very slowly, and they go forward another fifteen feet, and then twenty, and then they pass through the mouth of the tunnel and darkness begins to close around them as they are engulfed.

What is happening to Hannibal now is doubtlessly a panic attack, but it is unlike any that Will has ever seen, and he’s witnessed hundreds - both professionally and in the course of some of his recreational activities. Hannibal is in the grip of some bone-deep terror, but it seems to be happening to Hannibal’s body alone. His mind stands outside of it, responding with lucidity and calm even as his hands grip the steering wheel so tightly that the knuckles go white. He is like a pilot, working to guide a malfunctioning craft into a controlled crash landing.

Will feels Hannibal’s distress on his own skin, perhaps to a degree that exceeds Hannibal’s own somatic response, and his heart rate picks up and his skin prickles with cold sweat.

The traffic comes to a complete stop. The tunnel’s entrance is a fading memory in the rearview, the exit only a vague pinprick of light.

Hannibal’s skin is pale in the light of the dashboard.

“What can I do to help you?” Will asks.

“Talk to me.”

So Will does.

In the black of the tunnel he talks of things that he has never spoken to anyone of before, things that he has hidden not because they expose his darkness but because they make him feel vulnerable and weak. He follows his instincts in this, understanding that if he exposes himself like this now it will lessen some of Hannibal's shame in the face of his own fears, and thus cause them to weigh less heavily upon him.

It still astonishes Will how often he finds himself speaking to Hannibal. Before now, he has always been a listener. It has been his talent to know others intimately while remaining himself visible only as a projection of what others wished or imagined to see in him.

Now Will speaks of understanding, even when he was still quite young, that there were no barriers in the lines of attraction for him, that he felt no differently about boys than he did girls, except perhaps that his feelings towards the first tended to come more frequently and were apt to be stronger.

There was a story, told in whispers among well bred guests and employees both, of an ancestor of Will's - the fourth brother of some great, great, great cousin of his - who had run away to New Orleans with a field hand. When they had been discovered there, in bed together, the whisperers said (though never knowingly in Will's presence) the slave had been killed, and quite horribly, though the details about this varied from teller to teller. The fate of Will's ancestor was more consistent; he was locked alone in his room with a pistol until he did what one matron of a family almost as old and wealthy as Will's own had referred to as "the only decent thing."

When he was young, before he came to under that there was no context in which a slave could really consent to relations with their owner, he thought about them as martyrs for love. He had laid awake wondering if they had died with the conviction that the small bit of time together allowed them was worth the brutal ending, or if such defiance had been impossible in the face of violent hatred. Later, though, he had come understand that regardless of whatever loneliness or longings his ancestor might have felt, there was a strong possibility that he was little better than a rapist; at best, the man had led a subordinate into a situation in which he came to great and terrible harm.

From all of this, Will became acutely aware that the feelings he bore towards other boys were not only a grave danger to himself, but might also get the object of his affections killed.

This knowledge percolated in him strangely, an uncomfortable bedfellow to his inclination towards violence. "I didn't hide, exactly," he tells Hannibal, and insists, "I was never ashamed," though that is not entirely the truth. "But sometimes I used it opportunistically."

He found that speaking of his queerness, even in the most covert of terms, was often enough to invoke the type of hostility that made it easy for him to excuse killing, and that large older men were most likely to to give him the excuse he wanted.

But sometimes, instead finding disgust and outrage when he hinted towards such things, he found kinship. "That 'me too' we all long towards," he says, and speaks of the astonishing way that his heart, in those moments of recognition, would turn from its violent intent and become warm and gentle and would bubble with glee.

Yet when he came to more worldly places - and as the world, in general, became more open - he had not been entirely above hunting in gay bars, and he tells Hannibal now how when he was in grad school he would play the halpless bunkin tourist who'd already had too much to drink and who didn't have the wherewithal to notice when the powder was slipped into his drink. It was easy to justify his actions when they rid the Community of date rapists, but as he grew older he had become uncomfortable with the gambit and moved on to other things.

"I tried dating in college," he says, and watches Hannibal to make certain that this topic will not add to his anxiety. "For a long time, I had a steady girlfriend, but I came to understand how impossible it was for me to grant her the type of emotional honesty that she wanted. It didn't seem fair to her."

She'd been interested in dream interpretation, and had wanted Will to tell her about his dreams. This was impossible - they were bloody, those dreams, and in their bloodiness full of too much terror and joy than he dared to express.

He dreamed often of cutting the beating heart from the people whom he cared about and replacing it with a portion of his own, so that they got up and lived again, but ever after walked about the world seeing and feeling things in the same way that he did.

"The impossibility of telling her this - of telling her about it the way that I am telling you now - was what really convinced me that I wasn't doing either of us any favors.

"We were still friends afterwards, so that was alright. It's easy for me to be friends, especially when all they want out of the friendship is someone who will love and support them. As long as they don't insist on trying to see past the helpful facsimile of myself that I offer then it's safe."

He reaches over and rest Hannibal's knee. "It's only someone starts to get too close that I start to feel like I'm in danger, and then sometimes I get stupid."

"I hadn't noticed," Hannibal says, and despite the tense panic that is still flowing off him in waves his voice is so dry that Will has to laugh.

The light at the end of the tunnel is getting closer now, but Will looks for something else to hold Hannibal's focus. "Before I broke things off with that girl, though," he says, "I went skiing with her family. That was the first time I saw snow - real snow, you know, not just a few short-lived flakes, and I though -"

Hannibal hisses air through his teeth like he's been struck, then he raises his fist and brings it down on the dashboard hard enough to make the SUV sway on its shocks, and for an instant Will is badly frightened of him.

His chest rises and falls rapidly, and he blows air out through his nose like an angry bull as he says, "That's why this is happening to me."

"Tell me," Will says.

“It was the snow,” Hannibal says. “We were on holiday, and the snow came down the mountain. It was like the mountain itself came down on top of us - the roof beams were groaning under the weight of it, and the power went out and everything was so dark. The men in the other rooms were shouting at one another, but I couldn't understand what they were saying.

“And Mischa was screaming in the dark for our mother - more outrage than fear, at least at first, I think - and I realized…”

“Tell me, Hannibal,” Will says again. “What did you realize?”

“That they - our parents - were outside. They were outside when the avalanche wiped everything else away and buried us alive.”

They are out of the tunnel now, and the orange glow of setting sun seems to put color into both of their skins, but Hannibal is still in turmoil.

He is not recovering lost memories, exactly, Will knows, but he is rediscovering the implications that they have for his current life, and that is nearly as fraught with challenges and dangers.

Will gives him space now, to tarry with his memories and the grief that they bring.

But ten miles up the road, as they come up on a roadhouse bar, Will says, “Stop here. I think we could both use a drink or two.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm fairly positive I read a story about an escaped slave and his owner's son running away together, and that it inspired that bit of the chapter, but I can't for my life remember the source.

Chapter 5

The bar looks like trouble, but Hannibal finds he doesn't care.

Beside him, Will is light on his feet, despite the blood loss and the sickly paleness of his skin, and his eyes are sharp and intent as they take in their surroundings - the gleaming grey concrete floor, the tattered bar stools and the mismatched tables on the far end of the room, in the shadowy corner behind the pool table.

It's more a look of someone who's looking for trouble than someone who is on the lookout for it, but Hannibal finds that doesn't bother him either.

There is, in his own hands, a longing to grab onto something, to break and tear and destroy whatever or whoever might come close enough to reach - anything, to distract from the memories that are battering against the inside of his skull like a trapped animal. It's a low feeling, though, dejected and lacking in spirit, and he wonders without much curiousity why it is that Will can be so brightened by the prospect of violence while such potentialities only drive Hannibal further into his own shell.

They seat themselves side-by-side behind the table nearest the far corner of the room, where the shadows are thickest and they can watch the door.

Will takes up the menu from the condiment caddy and looking down at it says, "Let's get food, too, maybe it won't be too awful. Just don't try to order anything with the word 'salad' in it unless it's prefaced by 'taco.'"

When the waitress comes over to greet them Will orders them both double shots of Jack.

"Nothing fancier?" Hannibal asks.

"Weren't you the one who told me more expensive isn't the same thing as better?"

The drinks help a bit, but it's the meal that goes a long way towards making Hannibal feel more like himself, even if it's only a subpar chuck steak with fries of dubious freshness. He supposes that Will knew what a difference having warm food in his belly would make, and he feels at once embarrassed for being such an easy mark and absurdly grateful.

He sees Will watching him, a fond smile on his face.

Hannibal says, "Sometimes I think you already know everything that I haven't told you."

"But I don't," Will says, as though to reassure him. "I just know how you feel about it."

Hannibal thinks that's strange, since he himself so often doesn't understand what he's feeling or why. He doesn't try to argue, though.

A group of men get up from the bar stools and walk over to the pool table to begin a game, and when the largest of the pack circles around, Hannibal sees a confederate flag painted on the back of his leather jacket.

Hannibal turns to glance at Will, and sees that his eyes have fixed on the same sight and that there is an avid gleam in them.

Will's hands, resting on the surface of the table, ball themselves into fists. Hannibal curls one of his own hands around Will's fist and leans in close to ask in a low voice, "Are you hunting?"

From the pool table comes provocative laughter, and Hannibal glances up long enough to see that the men are watching them and to understand what they think they are seeing. He meant to restrain Will, to discourage the desire to hurt them that he could see blooming in his lover's eyes, but of course the gesture looks intimate from the outside - is, point of fact, underpinned by a great deal of emotional intimacy, though not in this moment for the reasons the strangers assume.

Will compounds the obvious by folding his free hand on top of the one that Hannibal is holding, sandwiching Hannibal's hand between his own. He maintains eye contact with the large man as he does this, and Hannibal sees the man's lips curl into a snarl in response to the warm little smile on Will's face.

"I just want to get a little blood on my knuckles," Will tells him. "Don't worry."

"You need better coping skills," Hannibal tells him, and shaking his hand free he rises from the table.

The bathroom is, at least, clean. As he pauses to wash his hands, Hannibal sees a condom machine on the wall. He looks at it thoughtfully before feeding it enough quarters to get three.

When he comes out of the bathroom, Hannibal is not especially surprised to see the mood of the place has changed. Will is still glaring daggers at the big man, an obvious provocation, and the awareness that something is going to happen soon is clear in the way that the other patrons keep glancing their way, or else refuse to look that way but sit with tense shoulders, curled over their drinks.

"Look at this shit," Will tells Hannibal, when he comes back to the table. His voice is deliberately loud, and Hannibal casts his eyes skyward before sitting back down at the table. He begins to work on what remains of his dinner quickly, since it seems obvious that they won't be here much longer. "We're in Ohio, for Christ's sake, and this dipshit is wearing the stars and bars like he has even the slightest pretext that he's doing anything other than advertising himself as a dedicated racist."

There is, Hannibal thinks, in the set of the big man's shoulders, a knowledge that he is being baited into something and a desire to avoid it, but so blatant a challenge can't be ignored, and the man turns towards Will, the pool cue still in hand.

Will stands to meet him. The big man has at least half a foot and perhaps sixty pounds on Will, and enough of that is muscle to make Hannibal uneasy, even knowing Will's taste in prey. He looms above Will, leaning over him to bring their faces close enough that Will might have leaned forward and bitten off his nose, had the desire took him.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he demands, and again Hannibal sees that edge of uneasiness, a sort of frustrated puzzlement at having been drawn into whatever this is. He’s a patsy, but just smart enough to suspect it.

“My problem is I’m here trying to have a nice meal with my boyfriend,” Will says, exaggerating his draw, “and instead I have to look at some clownish fucking yankee buffoon sporting a traitor’s flag.”

“You want to go outside.”

“Sure do,” Will says. His voice is not especially aggressive. “I’ll be glad to stomp your ass.”

The bartender is heading towards them, a stormy look on his face, and Will reaches into his back pocket and takes out his billfold.

“What’s going on over here?” the bartender demands, and Will gives him a friendly, placating smile.

“I’m glad you came over here,” he says. “I want to square up on my tab, and this gentleman’s too, since he won’t be coming back inside after I’m done with him.”

One of the big man’s friends laughs in wonderment at Will’s cockiness, but when the man turns and glares at him the sound dies abruptly.

The bartender turns to look at Will’s target. “Johnson, why are you always causing trouble?”

There’s an angry desperation in the man’s voice when he answers. “I didn’t cause anything. This little son of a bitch is spoiling for a fight, so I guess I’ll let him have his way.”

“I’m obliged,” Will says, and smiles warmly up at Johnson.

Hannibal thinks if the man knew what lay behind that smile he’d probably piss himself.

Instead, he throws his hands in the air and turns for the door. His friends follow him outside.

Will puts a fifty dollar bill on the table, then he puts two more on top of the first. “That ought to more than cover everything, won’t it?” Will asks, and when the bartender reaches across the table to pocket the bills Hannibal thinks how it was smart of Will to refrain from attaching any strings to the offering. If he’d told the man not to call the police, he might have felt honorbound to do just that, but since Will had not framed the offering as a bribe the bartender feels lucky rather than beholden, so he’s likely to do want to do Will a favor, provided things don’t get too ugly outside.

“You don’t get involved in this, you hear me?” Will tells him, as they head towards the door. “I don’t always need you to rescue me, you know.”

Hannibal doesn't answer. He is putting a lot of work into keeping his face neutral, but he wonders if Will can tell how excited he is to see this. He supposes that Will must know.

Will holds his chin angled slightly upwards as he approaches Johnson, and Hannibal thinks that there is something snobbish in his defiant carriage, before he realizes that it's the exact same way that Hannibal is apt to carry himself when facing a challenge.

Johnson watches Will approach him. Under normal circumstances, Johnson ought to have had little to fear from a man so much smaller than himself, but there is nothing normal about Will, and Hannibal thinks that the big man might be begining to sense that.

Everything is going faster than Johnson wants it to, and Will is deeply amused by the way the man struggles to hide an anxious suspicion that he's been roped into something that he wants no part in and that might end badly for him.

He begins to circle Johnson, and the other man brings his fists up and turns with Will.

Johnson's reach is longer than Will, and Will inches in closer until there is just enough distance between them from Johnson's swing - which is sloppy and wild - to make contact with Will's jaw.

Will bounces away before he can get another hit in, and then he tilts his eyes up at Johnson and smiles with a mouthful of bloody teeth, and that is when he feels the big man begin to get really scared.

Will closes in on him, and Johnson backs away from him clumsily, barely dodging circle of onlookers who have come out to watch the fight, and Will can see the understanding beginning to truly bloom in him, the knowledge that he's been tricked - that he has allowed himself to be fooled - and that he is going to bleed for it. It's a small thrill, compared to what Will would like to do to the man, but he savors it.

"That was your freebie," Will tells him, and sees Johnson's fear multiple again.

In the corner of his eye, Will sees Hannibal watching from the sidelines. Hannibal wants to be annoyed with him, Will knows, wants to dismiss all of this as foolishness, but his body is taut with pride and anticipation and a desire to wade in himself.

He won't say no to me tonight, Will thinks, pleased.

Johnson charges at him, perhaps imagining Will to be distracted, and Will goes under his wildly swinging fists and drives his own into Johnson's belly, and when the man curls around the sudden pain in his center, Will sees his head turned in profile and drives his open palm against Johnson's ear.

That provokes a new kind of agony, one that Will - who had his ears boxed so many times when he was small that he finds it a wonder that his hearing wasn't permanently damaged -

easily recognizes in its extremity. He wonders if he's ruptured Johnson's ear drum, hopes with a savage joy that he has.

He begins to circle again, and Johnson, one hand still clasped over his ear, struggles to turn quickly enough to keep Will's face to him.

Hannibal is standing on the inside edge of the crowd, watching the fight intently, when someone behind him flicks the back of his ear. Hannibal slaps at the hand, a hair too late to make contact, then he steps forward.

But the person follows him and does it again, breaking Hannibal's focus. "Stop," Hannibal says, without looking back, and he bleeds menace into his voice.

Behind him, there is drunken laughter, and then a hand shoves at the center of Hannibal's back, the fingers jabbing at him, and Hannibal plants his feet and makes his body rigid. He might have been able to ignore the provocation, except that he feels the person lean in, his beer-scented breath hot against the back of Hannibal's ear. The man inhales, poised to speak, and Hannibal knows that the words that come out of his mouth will be ugly - it will be something that seeks to render either Will or the thing that he and Will have together ugly - and before he can speak the words into the world Hannibal swings around seizes him by the collar and the fabric of his shirt stretches and Hannibal sees the swastika tattooed on his clavicle and blind panicky rage explodes behind Hannibal's eyes and he releases his hold long enough to seize the man by the hair instead and drags him down to drive his face into the gravel drive.

Hannibal falls on top of him and his fists go to work.

Someone is screaming, and Will ducks Johnson's swinging fist just as the sound registers for both of them, and the fight halts as they turn towards the noise.

"Christ, he's killing him," Will hears Johnson say.

"Help me," Will says to Johnson, and bolts into the crowd, elbowing his way through.

Hannibal is on the ground on top of one of Johnson's friends - the one, Will thinks, who had laughed when Will shittalked Johnson - and he is hitting him, and it is not the measured, deliberate beating that had done such a number on Will's face months ago. The blows are wild and random and each one comes with the force of a hammer, and in the thirty seconds that it takes Will to close the distance between himself and Hannibal the man has left off of screaming and is lying still in the gravel instead, and Hannibal is still hitting him.

Even in the crisis, Will has the sense not use Hannibal's name.

"Honey," he says instead, his voice cajoling as he bends over Hannibal to catch one of his arms at the elbow. "Hun - stop. You need to stop now," but he shakes Will off of him without

so much as a glance and goes on beating the still form beneath him.

When Johnson catches up to them he grabs Hannibal by the shoulder and yanks him up off the ground, and Will puts his body between Hannibal and the bleeding man just before Hannibal breaks free. Johnson finds the limit to his courage, and he backs away from Hannibal and Will and his prone friend.

The same dangerous, feral look is in Hannibal's eyes as had been in Dolarhyde's when he picked Will up to strangle him, a wounded hatred so deep that even Will has trouble relating to it, and for an instant Will is afraid that Hannibal will hurt him now too.

But then Hannibal recognizes him - not as a barrier keeping him from the thing he wants but as someone he loves. He blinks at Will, and his eyes are desperately confused and full of pleading, and Will begins to understand how deeply lost inside his own head Hannibal has just been - and too, that he isn't entirely with Will now.

Behind Will, the man on the ground begins to make a gurgling, choking sound, and as relieved as Will is for confirmation that he's still alive, Will does not believe those noises bodes well for him.

Will grabs Hannibal by the wrist and drags him through the crowd. Hannibal follows without resistance, dazed into passivity.

When they are out of earshot, Will says with soft urgency, "Sweetheart, we need to get out of here before you catch another murder charge. We need to *go*."

The SUV is just ahead of them, and Will gives Hannibal a shove towards the passenger side before climbing in behind the wheel.

Gravel spits out from under the tires as Will pulls out onto the road.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will knows that he probably shouldn't be driving, but as of late he's done a lot of things that he probably shouldn't have.

Hannibal's hands sit limply in his lap, bleeding. The knuckles are torn and ragged, and Will would like to take the time to stop, to bathe them in clean cool water and bandage them himself, but he doesn't dare to slow down until they've at least put the Ohio state line behind them.

He says instead, "The first aide kit is in the glove box." When Hannibal doesn't respond, Will says his name. Hannibal's head turns toward him slowly. His hair hangs down over his eyes, a wild mess. "Get the first aide kit out of the glove box and take care of yourself, Hannibal. Please."

Hannibal makes no move to do so.

"Do you think I really killed that man?"

"I honestly don't know," Will tell him. "Probably not."

"I don't care if I did."

Will isn't sure what response Hannibal is looking for, so he covers all the potentialities. "I know you don't. That doesn't bother me, Hannibal. It doesn't bother me if you killed him, either."

"I don't care if he dies," Hannibal says again, firmly. "But I've never done anything like that before. I wasn't in control of myself. I've used my fists on people before, more often than I should have, but I've always been in control of what I was doing while I did it - I controlled how much or how little I hurt them and in what ways.

"But this was something else. I don't know what that was. It scares me."

"And you're not used to being scared," Will says, "any more than you are used to being out of control."

"I feel like I'm unraveling." Will looks away from the road long enough to glance at Hannibal, and sees the pleading in his eyes. "Are you doing this to me?"

"In a close relationship, you have to expect some degree of blurring between the individuals involved," Will allows. "It might be that you are perceiving things - emotionally and intellectually - in a manner that is closer to how I tend to do so. But Hannibal, I'm not doing anything deliberately and I think that there's a lot more to this than that.

“You’re under and incredible amount of strain,” Will goes on, and reaches over to lay a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder.

Hannibal shrugs it away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Hannibal.” It might be a question. Will isn't sure himself.

“You always have your hands on me, but I can’t lay a finger on you without watching to be sure you don’t try to bite it off. Why is that?”

“I’m doing the best that I can.”

Hannibal scoffs as he reaches, at last, to take the first aide kit out.

“I love you,” Will says.

“Maybe so, but you’re really bad at it.”

Will’s quiet for a long time. Then he says, “Okay.”

Hannibal runs bloody fingers through his own hair and sighs. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean that.”

“It's fine. I deserve it."

“I'm sorry that I hit you.”

“Christ. Don't be. I deserved that too.”

He wonders if he should tell Hannibal that he lashed out just now because he was overwhelmed, and that this is understandable if not especially productive, and that Will knows that well enough not to take it personally. And he wonders, too, just how much of that is the truth.

Instead, he asks, “What did that man do to provoke you?”

“First, he was only being obnoxious, but then I saw he had a swastika tattooed on himself.”

“Shit,” Will says. “If I’d known that I’d have wanted to kill him, too, but you said yourself that your reaction was unprecedented.”

“The men that Mischa and I were trapped with were like that,” Hannibal tells him. He speaks slowly, as though he is feeling out the words as he goes. “It wasn’t something that they marked on their bodies - they weren’t so foolish as that, but… you know that Lithuania was occupied by the Germans during the war?”

Will looks towards him and nods. He is thinking that this is good - that it is good that Hannibal is coming closer to speaking of the thing at the root of so many of his problems, even if it is unfortunate that he had to be so badly torn down before he could begin. Given his own choice, Will would have rather coaxed this out more gently.

“There was no meaningful resistance there, and what existed was crushed almost at once. The Nazis barely considered us human, yet they were welcomed as liberators, and when I was growing up there were still any number of people who still felt fondly about them.

"These were people, you understand, who gladly informed on Jewish families, and on their neighbors or even family for holding communist sympathies, and they did none of this for any particular personal benefit, but simply for the pleasure of bringing destruction down on others. These people were never punished in any meaningful way; they walked about - quietly, generally, because if they’d been too bold they might have been deported - but unashamed.

“My uncle Robert was executed, during the occupation. I understand that he wasn’t especially political - he just had strong ideas about how people should treat one another and a short temper for anyone who didn’t meet up to those expectations.”

Hannibal pauses, and Will turns his head and sees a thoughtful, wry smile on his face. “My father was very young when this happened, but whenever I got angry he used to tell me that I reminded him of Robert, especially if I fumed or froze people out.”

Outside, the sun is setting, and Will flips on the Cayenne’s headlights. He asks Hannibal, “How did you know the men trapped with you were collaborators?”

“At first, I only knew that they made me feel uneasy - and that I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Before the avalanche, one of them kept trying to get Mischa to take a piece of chocolate from him, but she wanted nothing to with the man.”

Taking a chance, Will reaches over and rests a hand on Hannibal’s knee lightly, and is relieved when Hannibal takes it at once. He lifts it from his knee and folds it between both of his own stiffening hands. The gauze that wraps his knuckles is rough against Will’s skin.

“She’d have been like Bev, I think,” Hannibal continues. “Mischa. She knew what she knew and she never doubted her instincts, even as young as she was.

“And my mother was terrified of them. She wanted us to leave early - Mischa and I had heard them arguing about it the night before - but my father had the same stubborn streak as Robert had. I have it too, I suppose.”

“That’s my good luck,” says Will, who remains mystified that Hannibal has yet to turn away from him, despite everything.

“After we were buried under the snow, the men spoke more freely among one another, and after a few days they stopped worrying about what we might overhear. By then it was only the two of us and the four of them.

“There had been a cook. He was a good man, I think, and he’d tried to look out for us - he told us to stay away from the other men, especially the one with the chocolate, which I’m sure was gone by then in any case. If we’d come earlier in the season, the pantry would have been well stocked, but that was the last week that the lodge was open, so… there wasn’t much food.”

Will asks, “What happened to the cook?”

“He tried to dig a way out for all of us. He made it, perhaps, half way, and then his tunnel collapsed around him. And when that happened, it made everything else shift, and another wave of snow came down on top of us.

“So,” Hannibal says, in a calculated understatement, “I don’t like closed spaces.”

Will acknowledge this with a small huff of sympathetic laughter.

“Mischa was… outraged that Cook didn’t come back. She hadn’t seen where our parents went, so I could lie about that - I could try, anyway, though I don’t think she ever believed me completely - but we were watching when the tunnel came down around him. I’m not sure that she understood that he was dead - she was very young - but she had seen him disappear and did not accept that we’d been left behind. I had to watch her closely, because for several days after that she would try to dig into the snow the way that she’d seen him do.

“Then the men would get angry.”

“How was oxygen getting into the lodge?” Will asks.

“The big chimney in the central room didn’t collapse,” Hannibal says. “When the men opened the flue air could get inside.

“It was cold, and it was dark most of the time, and the men would sit around and talk about what they had done in the war. The stories were… offensive to me, even then. Even when I was too young to understand everything. And when no one came for us and no one came for us and still no one came for us the question of why became, for them, a political one.

“It was communist inefficiency, or Moscow’s indifference, or some sort of Jewish plot.”

Will shakes his head in wonderment. “You’re joking,” he says, though he knows that Hannibal is not.

“No. And they weren’t either. These are the ideas that they had early on, you understand, only a few days in. This was before they began to go crazy.”

“Why did it take so long for help to come?”

“I don’t know.”

“But when you were finally rescued -”

“I was never rescued. Once the snow had become so compacted that it was more ice than anything else, they decided to try to dig out again. They had me work on lengthening the tunnel, since I was smaller and since if it caved in they thought that it would be better me than them, while they widened it for themselves further down.

“When I hit sunlight, I just ran.

“I’m not entirely clear on what happened after that, Will. I was lost in a… kind of mental fog for years after that.

“I suppose that when I was found it provoked a great number of questions, but I wasn’t capable of answering them. There was a roaring in my head when people asked me questions, and I found that I had no voice.”

“Selective mutism is not uncommon among children who have experienced extremely traumatic events,” Will tells him, gently. “But you can talk about it now.”

“I never have before.”

When Will asks the next question, he puts the weight of all of the love he carries for Hannibal and every scrap of kindness that is in him into it. “Are you able tell me what happened to Mischa?”

“She died, Will. She got sick and she died.”

It’s a lie, obviously, but Will understands how often people tell lies to protect themselves, and he doesn’t hold it against Hannibal. He lets the topic close.

“I’m grateful that you told me all of this, Hannibal. Does it help, talking about it?”

“I don’t know,” Hannibal says. “I think so, but there’s so much else happening… I’m trying to tough all of this out, Will, but I don’t think I’m doing well. I’m worried about myself, and I’m even more worried about you. I don’t know how to help.”

It is Will’s first instinct to tell reassuring lies, to hide away as much vulnerability as he possibly can by deflecting the discussion away from himself and back to the question of Hannibal’s own mental wellbeing.

Will fights this desire. He strives for honesty instead, or at least as much as he can manage.

“Talking like this helps me,” he says. “The best thing that you can do for me right now, Hannibal, is to let me help you. If I can focus on taking care of you that will help me to take care of myself too.”

Will wants this to be the entire truth, wants being able to be good to someone to be enough - wants his love for Hannibal and Hannibal's love for him to be enough to keep him stable.

But he knows that it won't be; the fist fight hasn’t done as much for him as he’d hoped it would, and he suspects that if he doesn’t kill someone soon he’ll really start to come to pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Listen I know that this one was sad but the next is mainly fluff and a handjob.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will and Hannibal stand close to one another, looking out the hotel window at the truck stop at the other end of the long expanse of blacktop.

They can see a handful of women walking among the parked semi trucks. Only a few of them are obviously sex workers.

“They’re vulnerable,” Hannibal says, nodding in their direction. “That’s one of the most dangerous jobs a sex worker can have, working truck stops and rest stops. They usually aren’t locals, so they don’t have a network of friends looking out for them, and if they disappear there’s no one to even report them missing, for the same reason.”

“I’ve heard that,” Will says. “I read that that's why they’re often targeted by serial killers.”

Hannibal doesn’t say anything, but he gives Will a measuring look.

“Don’t look at me that way,” Will says, annoyed. “You might as well ask if I find it sporting to shoot fish in a barrel or kick puppies. I’m better than that, I hope you know.”

“I do know - you’re just being too prickly,” Hannibal says, his voice soft with affection as he snakes an arm around Will’s waist to pull him close. “You're so sensitive.”

“I’m petty and emotionally fragile and vicious and irredeemably fucked up,” Will says, and there is a quiet contentment in his voice as he rattles off this list of his faults, which he knows is not all inclusive, brought on from the way that Hannibal’s chin is nuzzling against his shoulder, “but if you come to bed I’ll do something really nice for you.”

“That wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“What, since I bled my dumbass self out too much to get it up? I should have listened to you when you said to stop at two units, huh?”

Hannibal hesitates; eager but worried that his eagerness is selfish.

Will seems to read his mind. “Remember what I told you, about how you can help me by letting me help you? Let me take care of you, Hannibal. I want to.”

So when Will takes him by the wrists, cautious of his battered hands, Hannibal is glad to allow himself be led forward.

Will asks Hannibal to take off his shirt and lay on his back at the center of the bed, and Hannibal does so, arranging the pillows to prop up his shoulders first, and while he is doing

that Will takes the bottle of lotion from the bathroom.

He hands it to Hannibal. “That doesn’t smell too strongly for you, does it?” he asks.

“No, it’s good. Lemony.”

“Hold onto it for a minute, then,” Will tells him, and circles around to the foot of the bed.

Will leans over to spread Hannibal’s thighs apart before climbing into the bed and sitting cross legged between them.

He leans forward and unclasps Hannibal’s belt, loosening it with steady hands, and pauses to trace the outline of his hardening cock before undoing the fly. “Lift,” Will says, his fingertips pressing gently against the underside of Hannibal’s hips, and Hannibal obliges him by raising his butt up off the mattress so Will can draw his jeans off.

His boxers go next, and Hannibal sees Will smile like he’s just opened an especially welcomed and thoughtful gift when he slides them down to expose Hannibal’s erection.

“There we go,” Will breathes, his smile cracking open into a wide grin that seems to transform his entire face.

Will reaches up for the bottle of lotion. Hannibal gives it to him, but then he catches Will’s hand and draws him upward, bringing the underside of Will’s wrist to his mouth and kissing him at the pulse-point, feeling the rapid flow of Will’s blood beneath his lips.

When Hannibal releases him, Will opens the bottle of lotion and squeezes some out into his palm. He tosses the container to the floor carelessly.

Then he curls his hand around Hannibal’s cock and begins to work the shaft with a slow and steady up and down motion, and Hannibal makes no effort to contain the gasp that the feel of skin against skin draws from him.

He closes his eyes for perhaps ten seconds, focusing himself solely on the sensation of it, and when he opens them again he sees that Will is watching his face. Will’s own eyes are hooded, his expression almost lazy as he basks in second-hand pleasure while his hand strokes Hannibal languidly.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Will asks him, and Hannibal’s throat works but he can’t seem to get the words free, so he nods his head up and down against the pillow instead.

Will leans over Hannibal, bracing himself with one arm while the other still works his cock, and Hannibal can feel its tip press against Will’s belly. Will’s hand loosens from around Hannibal’s shaft, and he huffs in frustration at that, but then he feels Will’s nail tracing its way down the sensitive ridge that runs along the underside of his cock, which is enough to pull a moan from Hannibal's throat and make his toes curl, and when he comes to its base he cups Hannibal’s balls in his hand.

Will fondles his balls slowly and softly, then gives them a gentle squeeze. Hannibal’s hips buck convulsively, quite outside of his control, thrusting his cock at an angle against the

hardness of Will's stomach.

"Shhhh," Will whispers in Hannibal's ear. "Not yet," and Hannibal turns his head towards the warmth of Will's breath, his mouth searching for Will's own. Will lowers his head and his lips meet Hannibal's, and Hannibal's hand goes to the back of Will's neck, holding him close.

Eventually, Will slides away from the kiss. Hannibal lets him go, all his regrets at doing so fading away as Will's mouth begins to work its way down the underside of his chin and then his neck, kissing and sucking and nipping softly at the skin.

He comes to Hannibal's shoulder, and Hannibal nuzzles the side of his face against Will's cheek and shoulder affectionately. He senses Will's hesitation then, the slightest hitch to the slow, steady motion of Will's fist over his cock, and he tells Will, "Use your teeth."

Will's mouth teases the skin at the junction of his throat and shoulder, and when he feels Will's upper teeth scrape against his skin Hannibal balls his swollen fists in the sheets, senseless to the pain this brings, and struggles not to come.

"Harder," he tells Will, and the word is nearly a groan. "Bite me."

Will's face is flush and his breathing comes in short, shallow gasps, but he somehow manages to sound clinical when he tells Hannibal, "You're only saying that you want that because you think that it's what I want."

"I want it," Hannibal insists. "I know what I want, Will," and after a brief pause he feels Will rooting against his shoulder. Teeth close over the flesh just to the left of the base of his neck with enough pressure to bruise.

"Harder," Hannibal tells him. And he says, "Will. Please. Harder," and he feels Will's teeth tear into his flesh at the same time that his hand returns to Hannibal's shaft and begins to work it, faster and harder than before, and Hannibal comes, convulsively, a low hum escaping from his throat as he does so.

Will's teeth release him but his mouth continues to minister to place where he bit Hannibal, and he feels the pressure of Will's tongue pushing against his torn flesh, lapping at the blood, tasting him.

After a little while, Will sides down until his head is level with Hannibal's stomach, and he licks and sucks at the skin where Hannibal came on himself until it is clean. Hannibal lies still as he does this, his hands folded across his chest, and breathes loudly through his nose, struggling not to laugh or wiggle at the tickle of Will's stubble against his belly.

Then Will pulls himself back up to the head of the bed and lays on his side, facing Hannibal.

He turns his head to look at Will. "What would you say if I told you that makes me a little nervous?" he asks, but with no real anxiety.

"That it's about time that I found *something* that could make you feel that way," he says, but there's a hint of trepidation behind the smile, a lingering worry that he's done something

wrong.

“Stay with me, Will,” Hannibal says, suddenly frighten and utterly unable to identify the cause of that fear. “Please.”

It startles a laugh from Will. “Where else could I possibly want to go?” he asks, and Hannibal has no answer to that, except to turn to his side and curl himself around Will, clutching him against his own body fiercely.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still in the process of learning how to write sex scenes properly, but I feel like this one came out better than the last? And the challenge is fun, so I'm happy.

Come visit on tumblr, if you like. Sometimes I post moodboards for this series/other fics, as well as stuff that I guess might be called bonus material: pragnificent.tumblr.com .

Chapter 8

Will slides out of bed a couple hours before dawn, disentangling himself from Hannibal's limbs carefully so as not to wake him.

He pads silently to the window and lifts the curtain to look out across the parking lot, to the distant truckstop. The working girls still move between the tractor trailers, even at this late hour, and beneath the floodlights their shadows run out from them like spindly giants.

Will has hunted at truckstops a time or two before, and he knows he can get away with it.

Tuckers are easy marks; no need to spend a lot of time working to convince them to go someplace private, since they are already angling to get someone to go back to their cab with them as quickly as possible. With the window covers in place to keep nosey people from peeking into the cab, Will has found that's possible to do almost anything within that enclosed space, provided he is careful not to give them a chance to scream.

The body would have to be left behind, and Will's moral compass rebels against such waste, but on the other hand a long-haul trucker might not be missed for days - not until he failed to deliver his cargo or another trucker got curious about the smell.

I can be back within an hour , he tells himself, slipping out the door. *Hannibal might not even know I was gone.*

But of course, Hannibal wakes not long after Will has gone.

There is a sense of disorientation, much stronger than he usually feels upon waking in a strange bed. Six months from now, when he drifts up from drug-induced unconsciousness to find himself in a too-bright room with his wrists bound to the rails of a strange bed, the feeling of shocked, baffled lonesomeness will be much the same.

Now, he sits up in bed and says, "Will?" but there is no answer.

Hannibal gets out of bed and walks to the bathroom door, rapping on it twice before opening it, but there is no one there.

Hurrying now, Hannibal goes to the window. The SUV is still in its parking place, and as he takes that in with a self-deprecating sort of relief, his eyes travel across the parking lot and he sees Will, stark in the burn of the floodlights, crossing the blacktop a step behind a much larger man.

The sound that comes from Hannibal's throat is closer to a growl than a sigh. He turns and begins to pull on his clothing.

It would be easy for Will to justify this by telling himself that he's doing it for Hannibal. Hannibal needs his care now - is teetering on the edge of a breakthrough or a breakdown, and if he falls into the latter it will be because Will failed to guide him away from the precipice - and Will can't do that while he himself is fraying around the edges.

There would be some truth to that argument, even. But Will knows that at the heart of the thing there is nothing so noble about his motives.

He is afraid. Will is simply afraid, and he is too weak to manage that fear in any other way than to kill it vicariously.

The truck could not have been parked in a more convenient place. It is at the rear the truckstop, far away from the other semis and the lights that shine down on them, and the shadows are thick here. It's parked parallel to the edge of the blacktop, and on the side of the truck there is a narrow length of trashy woods, brush and spindly trees, bordered on the other side by the freeway.

Will lets the trucker climb up into his cab first. He is following after, feet on the steps, when a hand grabs him by the shoulder and yanks him back to the ground.

Yelping in surprise, Will spins around, drawing without any conscious thought the folding knife from his pocket and opening it with a flick of his wrist, and he is perhaps half a second away from using it on his assailant when he realizes that it's Hannibal.

His face is inscrutable, as still as wet stone, but Will can feel the anger rolling off of him in wounded, livid waves.

Up in the cab, the trucker is shouting, confused and outraged, but Will barely hears him.

Will tries to back away and comes up against the truck. The knife clatters to the blacktop. He stoops quickly to get it, and before he can even straighten Hannibal has grabbed his arm again and is dragging him away.

" *Jesus* ," Will hisses at him, keeping his voice low. "What's the matter with you?"

Hannibal looks down at him, his expression as close to gape-mouthed as Will has ever seen, but then he draws his lips into a thin line and turns his face away. He does not release Will.

"It's not like I was actually going to fuck him," Will says, spitefully. "Don't get so jealous."

Hannibal comes to a stop. Will wrenches his arm free, knowing as he does it that the only reason he is able to do so is because Hannibal had decided to let him go. His sense of resentment grows.

"I know exactly what you were going to do."

"I don't feel right," Will says, and is disgusted by the note of pleading in his own voice. "I don't feel right and I can't keep this up without doing it."

“You aren’t the only fucked up person in this world, Will, do you know that?” Hannibal tells him, and his voice is icy cold and completely devoid of sympathy. “Most of them get by without murder as an emotional crutch.”

And Will is trying to figure out what to say to that when Hannibal looks back towards the truck. His eyes narrow, tracking motion. Then, silently, he charges back towards the truck.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hannibal glances back at the semi he sees the trucker's face reflected in the light his cellphone screen. The man looks up at him, and the panicked realization there in his face is such that even at this distance Hannibal knows that he knows.

He turns back running for the truck, and when he gets there he jumps up into the cab steps and pounds his already battered fist against the window. It doesn't so much as crack, but the trucker tosses his phone to the side in a panic and reaches for his keys instead. He fumbles with them, as Hannibal bangs on the window, and then Will is tugging at the back of Hannibal's shirt for his attention, and he passes a short metal sap into Hannibal's hand, and when he hits the glass with the club it shatters and the trucker drops his keys into the foot-well, and when he bends to reach for them Hannibal catches him by the hair and then by one of his flailing wrists and pulls him out the window.

One hand clutching the man's upper arm and the other pressed over his mouth, Hannibal pins the trucker's body against his own and drags him around to the other side of the truck, the shadowy side where the pavement ends and there is nothing but scraggly woods and brush. The man is bigger than Hannibal, both in height and girth, but Hannibal is stronger by far. It is not really a fight.

There's no option now, Hannibal knows, but that they kill him, and he pulls the man down the embankment and into the filthy little stream that runs there sluggishly, littered with fast food wrappers and empty beer cans, and Hannibal knocks the trucker's legs out from under him so he falls, sprawling on his back with a splash in the cold stinking water, and Hannibal is on top of him before he can surface long enough for a shout or a gasp of air, pinning him down under the water with one hand on his forehead and a knee on his chest.

The man flails at Hannibal with his free fist, and Hannibal growls, "Help me," at Will, but Will is already in the water with him and he catches the man's wrist in one hand and presses down on his thigh with the other, and it is not so dark that Hannibal can't see clearly the outraged bafflement in the man's eyes at the absurdity of finding himself drowning in ten inches of water, the very tip of his nose winking out occasionally from among the ripples. Under Hannibal's palms his body strains to rise up, the cords on his neck standing out starkly as he tries to lift his head, the distance between death and another breath of life so very small.

"Let him up," Will says, and Hannibal jerks his head up to look at him. "Just for ten or fifteen seconds," he adds quickly. And then, as though in clarification, he says, "It'll last longer," and Hannibal finds himself wanting to hit Will in a way that he hasn't since that night in the basement.

He turns his face away from Will. Hannibal tries to tell himself that he wants to let the poor bastard go, to walk away from this and damn the consequences, but he knows that isn't true.

The man's eyes are on him, pleading, and he knows that the trucker would gladly accept those ten seconds even if they were only part of a game to draw out his suffering, and Hannibal wants to do that - take him to the edge of death and then pull him back again a dozen times or more, just so he can watch the desperation growing and the knowledge of his own helplessness deepening in those eyes for as long as he can.

Hannibal wonders what might happen: would the man give up and stop playing along, refuse to rise for another desperate, pointless gasp of air, or would his body compel him to keep fighting until his heart gave out or his brain hemorrhaged under the strain? The curiosity is nearly a tactile thing, and hard to resist, but Hannibal keeps the trucker pinned beneath the water.

There's recrimination in the trucker's eyes, when he gives in and inhales that first gulp of water, and all of it for Hannibal, but it fades as he starts to grow hazy. His mouth goes slack beneath the water, hanging open, and there's no longer any pressure against Hannibal's palms. The man will stay under without any help from Hannibal, so he rises and retreats to the water's edge.

Will is more cautious - or maybe greedy. He stays with the body another three minutes just to be sure, then he pulls it into the drainage tunnel, which is wide enough for Will to move around inside provide he stoops, and leaves it deep inside.

Before they leave, Will will clean away that broken glass so it looks as though the window has simply been left open. He will sweep the cab's interior and exterior for fingerprints and other evidence, and he will smash the trucker's phone and dump it hours from here, though first he will confirm that Hannibal's instincts were correct - that the trucker had been looking at Hannibal's wanted poster and that his calling app had been open, a *9* and then a *1* typed there.

By dawn, people will begin to note the open window, but they will consider it none of their business, and it will only be when the trucker does not report with his delivery three days from now that he will be filed as missing and his semi located, and after that it will be another two days until smell inspires anyone to look for its owner in the drainage tunnel.

And by then, Will and Hannibal will be long gone.

Now, Will joins Hannibal on the stream bank. His back is to Will, and Will puts his arms around his waist, holding him at first tentatively and then with a fierceness, his forehead pressed between Hannibal's shoulder blades.

Will is shaking again, standing there with his arms around Hannibal, and he can sense that Will is scared now, more than he's ever been before, that this will be the last straw - the thing that sends Hannibal fleeing from him in outraged disgust.

That much alone is proof that Will, for all of his alarming insight, can't actually read his mind.

Hannibal works himself free of Will's embrace, but only so he can turn to face him. The tremors now are extreme, and conflicting emotions make war across the surface of Will's twitching face as Hannibal cups his jaw in his hand and lifts Will's head up to look him in the eyes. Those eyes flick from side to side, desperate for escape, but Hannibal holds him there until Will meets his gaze.

"You know, Will, I think that I finally understand what this trembling is all about," he says.

Will's voice is shaky, reaching for humor and falling pathetically short. "Are you going to be the psychiatrist now?"

"It's hard to avoid noticing that you have some lamentable blind spots in regards to your own emotions and motives," he tells Will, but with a firm sort of gentleness. "But there is nothing you can do to drive me away now, do you understand? No mistake or misstep, no foolish compulsion or deliberate cruelty. I might become frustrated or angry, but I won't leave. I'm with you now, Will. For as long as I live."

And he says again, "Do you understand?" and Will nods, but his body still trembles, and so Hannibal thinks that while he may understand he does not yet believe.

But that is all right, Hannibal believes, because there will be time.

It's a turning point for Hannibal, the ugly little murder in the dirty little stream. In killing for no reason other than the assuagement of Will's yen for violence and a selfish desire that they should dodge the consequences of that violence, he's sunk as far as he can go, Hannibal is confident. He's looked his own darkness in the face - has seen it and its effects looking back at him accusingly, confirming everything that he has always feared for himself - but he is still here.

He is still, more or less, himself.

And if Hannibal had wanted something different - something more merciful, or at least more benign - for himself, then at least there are consolations to life that he has chosen.

And too, there are still ways in which he can be gentle and kind. He can be good to Will, and Hannibal decides to do that now, and to forgive Will for dragging him into this stinking mess.

So he holds Will until the shaking has more or less abated, and then he waits for Will to sweep the crime scene. He follows Will back to the hotel and lets him take care of him, waiting in pensive quiet while Will draws him a hot bath and then rubs the shampoo into his hair, to spare Hannibal's swollen fingers the sting of the soap.

Hannibal lets Will rebandage his hands and clean the remaining stream mud from under his fingernails, too, and when he's done with that Hannibal draws Will in close to him, pressing

him against his own chest until Will begins to complain of their need to get back on the road.

The sun is just coming up as they pull out of the parking lot, and Hannibal is, despite everything, hopeful for what they will find at the end of this journey.

Chapter End Notes

I know things have been pretty grim lately, (to the point that I have gotten sort of worried that I might be alienating y'all...), but the good news is that we have a nice length of fluffy domestic happiness coming up before Bad Things rear their head...

Chapter 10

Will’s hopes and ambitions are marked on the safe house, perhaps more clearly than he knows. He calls it consideration, when Hannibal draws attention to the details, large and small, that would have made the place comfortable for Margot and her boy, but it looks more to Hannibal like an unspoken desire to have the two of them under his care, far from Mason’s control.

Everything is perfect, from the jungle gym in the backyard to the child locks in the kitchen. Will’s personal touch is shows in every inch, the dark wood furnishings and the muted reds and golds of the decor, all of it infused with the warmth of a slow-burning fire on a shadowy night.

The guest bedroom is obviously intended for Will himself, and is as decadently appointed as anything else that he’s designed, and Hannibal does not need to sink down onto the four-poster king-sized bed to know that it’s topped by a feather mattress, though he does so now for the pleasure of it, relishing the idea of relaxing into it after more than a week of dubious hotel beds.

A certain measure of dust has accumulated throughout the place, and they strip the bed and put the linens in the wash before Will shows Hannibal around the rest of the house.

The kitchen is not so well appointed as the one that Will had in Baltimore, but aside from that one exception it is the biggest and brightest cooking space Hannibal has ever had to work with. Large windows light the room, as they do throughout the house, and he and Will go out through the glass french doors and back outside.

The lawn is brilliantly green, even this late into the fall, and would fit in neatly in any suburban neighborhood, despite the wilderness that surrounds them. Stepping down from the back porch Will says, “I’ll need to call and cancel the lawn service in the morning - don’t let me forget.

"We’ll mow it ourselves,” he adds, and Hannibal can't help but cast his eyes skyward at the note of adventurous daring that comes into Will's voice at this declaration. He suspects that Will has never actually mowed a lawn himself, and furthermore guesses - correctly, it will turn out - that he won't be half finished mowing this lawn for the first time before he gets bored and discouraged and turns the job over to Hannibal.

Hannibal follows him outside. There’s a good fence around the yard, the better to keep a small child from wandering off, Hannibal supposes. A few yards beyond the fence, thought, there's nothing but pine forests on every side, the undergrowth sparse under the shade of the big trees. A gravel road had brought them the last four miles of their journey here.

Will goes through the back gate and approaches the propane tank, fiddling with it while Hannibal takes in their surroundings. After a few minutes, Will blows the air out through his teeth and straightens. “I have no idea how to turn this on,” he admits. “It’s alright - we’ll have someone come out tomorrow and you can just keep scarce while the technician is here.”

“How far are we from anyone else?” Hannibal asks.

“If you go back to the main road, I think you’ll find neighbors a couple miles down the way,” Will says. “And if you keep going that way there’s Aberdeen, though it’s actually about fifty miles out. There isn’t much to the north of us besides timberlands, and there’s not many people there who aren’t tied to the lumber industry. Now, if we go about a mile to the east there’s slough land. It’s something like a swamp - not too different from home, if you can ignore the decided lack of gators.”

It still stings a little when Will talks about ‘home,’ but Hannibal tries not to show it.

“We’re alone then.”

“I don’t look for anyone to come around who we haven’t invited. It’s possible we might get some hunters wandering around once deer season starts, but I’ll post some 'no hunting' signs at the borders of our property and they probably won’t bother trespassing. There’s a lot of woods out there.”

Past the propane tank there’s a couple of outbuildings; a shed that serves as a garage, in which Will has left the SUV, and a rather worn down looking chicken coop.

Will points at the latter. “We could fix that up and get some chicks, once the spring comes,” he says, and Hannibal wonders if Will is that confident in their future here or if he is simply trying to be reassuring. “I adore chickens, don’t you? Not point in getting meat birds, I'll tell you now - if they hang around long enough for me to get to know them I’ve never been able to abide having them killed, much less eating them. I’ve always been foolish that way."

Hannibal studies Will carefully, wondering if he was meant to understand that as a joke, but Will seems utterly sincere.

“Anyway, I think I can keep us nicely in fowl once I have a decent bird gun and a licence," Will goes on. "This is good land, even if the weather is totally incomprehensible.

"Some Rhode Island Reds for laying hens," Will adds. "And some ornamental birds just for looking at.”

“Silkies maybe,” Hannibal suggests, giving in to whatever this is.

“Why not? Those are good layers, too. And maybe a bantam rooster. It would be fun to watch a tiny little rooster strutting around like he’s the toughest creature in the world, wouldn’t it?”

“I already have one of those.”

Will swats Hannibal’s upper arm softly with the back of his hand. “Listen, old man; I am - *at most* - an inch and a half shorter than you.”

Hannibal doesn’t laugh, but his eyes do.

They circle back around to the front of the house. Will becomes more serious. “It would be nice to have Beth here.”

“It would,” Hannibal agrees honestly, but he equivocates. “I think we should wait a bit longer until we bring her up here, though, to be certain that it’s safe. But I’ll call Margot in a day or to check in.”

He wants his dog back - is surprised, actually, at how much he misses the animal - but he has no intention of rushing into closing the only conduit between themselves and Margot.

Hannibal wonders how he ever clamored after the phony warm smiles that Will used to give him, before they both knew better. The real thing is so much more; sharp edges and sly admiration layered on top of sincere gratitude, and below that just a dash of carefully checked resentment at finding himself beholden. There’s love in it, too - difficult and dangerous and delightful.

“I know what you’re doing."

“Margot does, too,” Hannibal says, and lets a flash of teeth show when he smiles at Will, deliberately predatory. “I think I might just get away with it anyway.”

There won’t be any hot water until the gas is turned on, but they take turns taking quick, chilly showers in the guestroom’s bathroom. Hannibal goes first, and when he steps out Will is waiting for him with a fluffy white robe, still warm from the dryer.

Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed and waits for Will to finish his own shower. He comes out of the bathroom shivering, and crowds in beside Hannibal on the bed, sapping his body heat.

“You’re like ice,” Hannibal says, a note of outrage in his voice. He unbelts his robe and lifts one side of it, letting Will snuggle in close against his bare skin.

He feels Will’s hand creeping across his thigh, moving with slow speculation towards Hannibal’s cock.

It’s tempting, but there’s a luxurious sort of comfort in being able to catch Will’s hand in his own to simply hold it, and in saying “Later tonight, Will,” with the knowledge that there is time - that they aren’t running now and there will be time for whatever they wish to do. In regards to that, Hannibal has a few ideas of his own, and he thinks perhaps Will sees his ambitions in his eyes, because he turns his face downward and blushes.

Dinner, such as it is, consists of canned soup heated in the microwave.

Hannibal looks down into his bowl dejectedly and says, “After tonight I am never going to eat garbage like this ever again.”

“I’ll go shopping tomorrow,” Will promises him. That he will go by himself is not discussed, it is so obvious a fact. “Make me a list - anything you like, provided it can be found at the super Wal-mart or a small town butcher shop.”

Hannibal nods, grimacing around his spoon, and Will knows that he really must be at the end of his rope; usually, he works to conceal disgust of any kind, a fact that the enemy inside of Will insists means Hannibal is hiding a great deal of disgust for Will himself, despite how irrational he knows this to be.

Hannibal forces down as much of his own portion as he can manage, then shoves the bowl away. Will peers down into the nearly full bowl, troubled, but knows better than to insist that he eat more. It's an argument they've had more than once over the last week, though Will's tried to be gentle about it.

It's a stress reaction, Will thinks; even before Will made the mistake during their first dinner together, Hannibal expressed discomforting in eating anything that he had not made himself or had seen prepared. During the trip east he's hardly eaten more than two or three solid meals, and has gone from extremely lean to outright gaunt.

Will gets up from the table and goes to the cupboards, looking through them until he finds what he knows is there somewhere; several shallow-bottomed plastic pails.

"Wait here," he tells Hannibal, and goes outside with one of the baskets in hand.

Hannibal doesn't follow Will outside as he goes out the back gate and circles around the outside rim of the fence. But after Will has been busy for a few minutes at the blackberry canes he spotted there earlier, he glances up and sees Hannibal standing just inside the threshold, looking out into the misty distance; on guard.

When there's a good quantity of blackberries in the bottom of the basket, Will goes inside, sliding past Hannibal as he steps away from the door and closes it behind them.

He comes up behind Will as he is rinsing the berries in the sink, and leans over him, wrapping his arms around Will's waist and resting his chin on his shoulder. Will plucks one of the fattest berries from the pail, and holding it between thumb and forefinger, reaches back over his shoulder. The heat of Hannibal's breath glows against his skin when he takes the berry from between his fingers delicately, but Will feels only the slightest brush of lips against his skin.

Smiling, Will puts his hand into the pall, sloshing the floating berries around in the warm water, and there is a sudden sharp pain in the ball of his thumb. Drawing his hand from the water, Will sees the thorn buried in his flesh.

Blood wells when he pulls it out, crimson against his darkly stained fingers, and Will turns the water off with his uninjured hand and tries to slide away for Hannibal, intent on finding some band-aids.

Instead, Hannibal turns Will to face him, and Will sees how intent his eyes are and the way his nostrils flare at the scent.

Will worries, sometimes, that he cannot distinguish between the things that Hannibal wants versus the things that he pretends to want for the sake of accommodating Will. Worse, he wonders to what extent Hannibal knows the difference.

But there is nothing contrived about the way that Hannibal brings Will's thumb to his mouth now. He watches Will thoughtfully as he sucks at the blood, his head cocked slightly to the side, and Will can imagine how it taste, the sharp cooperiness mingled with the sweetness of the berry juice that stains his fingers.

For the first time since he bled himself, Will feels a promising stirring of life between his legs.

Hannibal draws Will's thumb into his mouth, all the way down to its base, and Will gasps and reaches backwards for the counter edge with his free hand, feeling suddenly weak in the knees. In the light of the setting sun that flows through the kitchen window, Hannibal's eyes look nearly maroon.

"Upstairs," Will says, and sees the laugh lines crinkle around Hannibal's eyes.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The thing is that you don’t take fear seriously in me,” Will says, as Hannibal circles his arms around Will’s chest and begins to undo the buttons on his shirt from behind.

His head had been resting on Will’s shoulder, but now Hannibal tilts it at such an angle as to look up at him. “You don’t think I’m taking you seriously?”

“You are and you aren’t. I tell you I’m frightened of hurting you, and you think that means, ‘I should be careful with him because he can be fragile, and I shouldn’t push him too hard or too fast, and most of all I should check in to make sure he doesn’t feel pressured into anything he doesn’t want.’ But you don’t give enough weight to idea that I have good reasons to mistrust myself - to be frightened for you and about what I might do to you if I’m not under control.”

“I know that you’re dangerous, Will. You might be one of the most dangerous people on the planet.”

“That’s really funny. I thought I was a phony. A counterfeit monster.”

Hannibal sighs softly, his breath raising gooseflesh along Will’s shoulder. “Who among us can make the claim to have never said something cruel to a loved one in anger?”

Privately, Hannibal does not believe that dangerousness and contrived monstrosity are mutually exclusive categories. What he told Will about himself had been an exaggeration of Hannibal's own suspicions, calculated to undermine Will’s confidence, but though it’s become clear that wasn’t the entire truth, nothing Hannibal has seen so far has convinced him that he was entirely wrong either. It’s that very ambiguity that makes Will so uniquely dangerous. Were he a standard monster, he’d be easily predicted, parsed and dismissed, but since he is not it is much harder for Hannibal to know, even now, what he might do and why. He has at no point forgotten this, whatever Will may think, but has simply accepted it as a fact of life.

“I think the communication breakdown comes from the fact that you don’t get frightened very often.”

“That’s happened to me more often than it ever has before, since I met you.”

Working Will’s shirt over his shoulders, one of Hannibal’s fingers brush Will’s nipple, invoking a quick intake of breath. Hannibal pauses, thoughtful, and lets go of the fabric. He circles Will’s areola with a finger, just the faintest of feathery touches, then runs the calloused part of his thumb over the nipple itself.

Will shudders like a racehorse. “Christ, that’s a lot,” he says, and breathes out a shaky laugh. “That’s lovely.”

It takes Will some time to recover his line of thought, even after Hannibal withdraws his hand to return to the task of drawing off his shirt. “But you don’t know what it’s like, is the thing,” he says, finally.

Hannibal’s voice comes from directly behind Will’s ear. “Are you suggesting that I lack insight?”

“What I’m suggesting now is that you stop reading psychiatric journals, especially if you’re only looking for ammunition against yourself.”

“Mm,” Hannibal says noncommittally, and nuzzles his own cheek against Will’s, enjoying the rasp of his stubble, which is growing perilously close to a legitimate beard. “Let me focus for a minute,” he says, and reaches peers over Will’s shoulder as he undoes his belt and fly. “There now. How would you like to do this?”

Will rolls away from Hannibal and onto his belly. He rests his chin atop his folded arms and waits while Hannibal draws off his jeans and boxers. Will feels Hannibal’s hands on his ass, each palm cupping a cheek, and then as though he’s been caught by a sudden sense of shyness he moves up in the bed and begins to knead Will’s shoulders instead.

“But listen - there's a lot of things that I'm afraid of. You can say that you won’t leave, and you can even mean it completely, but that's no guarantee, Hannibal, that I wouldn’t lose you. Even if I could trust myself better not to hurt you, so much else could go wrong. There’s a whole world out there hunting for us.”

“For me.”

“Yeah. For you.”

Hannibal is silent for a long time. Then he sighs deeply and says, with almost freakish solemnity, “It is a lot to take in.”

He looks over his shoulder and sees that something is glittering in Hannibal’s eyes, and for a moment Will worries that it might be tears.

Then he parses it.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Can you be serious?”

Hannibal smiles with his teeth. “There’s enough of that around here already. Relax with yourself, Will, just for little while.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“In a minute. You’re so tense, Will, all through your body.”

“Yeah, well. Dick jokes probably aren’t the antidote for that.”

“My apologies,” Hannibal says, without the slightest hint of remorse.

He continues to knead the muscles along Will’s spine, working his way lower.

When Hannibal speaks again, some minutes later, he does so seriously. “You’re under no obligation, Will. Are you sure that you want this?”

“I’ll tell you to stop if I want you to stop, Hannibal. Don’t worry.”

“That isn’t really an answer my question.”

“Not from anyone else, Hannibal. Just you.”

Will can almost feel Hannibal’s ego swelling. A pleased, almost subvocal hum comes from his throat as his hands move over Will’s body.

“I’d rather you sit up in my lap. I’d like to be able to hold you against me, Will. And I want to see your face.”

“And I’d rather not have my teeth that close to the underside of your throat,” Will says. “So this is what we’re doing.”

“Alright,” Hannibal says, easily.

It comes out as *a’ight*, the accent stronger even than when Will deliberately plays up his own drawl.

“I’m corrupting your English,” Will says. “Or are you just making fun of me?”

Hannibal pretends to consider that. “Couldn’t it be both?

“Lift your hips,” he adds, and when Will does so Hannibal slides a towel beneath him.

Will is entirely still when Hannibal works a slicked finger into his ass, but when he draws it out again he whimpers.

“I know,” Hannibal says, understanding. “It’s normal to feel that way, Will.”

When Hannibal goes back to the task of opening him up, Will feels the first substantive stirring in his own cock since he bled himself. The nascent erection rubs against the towel beneath him, and Will is impatient - embarrassingly eager after so long and already nearly overwhelmed with arousal from the preliminary work Hannibal is doing. He tries to reach under himself, but Hannibal stops his hand.

“Just wait a little while longer,” Hannibal says. “And you’ve got to relax, Will. What I’m going to do will be so good for you, so relax.”

Will tries. He craves for himself the chance to let go - to be guided by Hannibal, and taken care of. Will cannot remember having ever wanted such things from anyone else.

He focuses on Hannibal's breathing, which steady and even, extruding calm and self-confidence, and feels some of the stress go out of his own body. Then, as Hannibal works his fingers further inside, he feels himself beginning to melt bonelessly into the sensation. He is glad that Hannibal can't see his face, because he feels the wide grin there and knows that it is foolish and self-indulgent.

"Ready?" Hannibal asks.

Words are difficult to come by. "I don't think I want you to stop what you're doing."

"But Will, the next bit is going to be so much better," Hannibal tells him, and Will bets his face looks stupid too. He bets Hannibal looks just so *smug*, and Will looks over his shoulder and sees that he is right, and sees also that Hannibal is cradling his own erect cock in his free hand, stroking it slowly with his thumb, and taken all together it makes such a pretty picture.

Will faces forward again, and says, "Go head," and after the smallest of hesitations he feels Hannibal's cock pressing against him. The pressure increases, and then Hannibal is inside of him.

There's some pain, but Hannibal is slow and careful, and it is less than Will anticipated and is in any case far from entirely bad. It's the pleasure the Will has difficulty riding out, and he claws his fingers against the top edge of the mattress and grinds his teeth together and groans for lack of anything to chomp down on.

He feels Hannibal teasing at his neck with his own teeth, nipping but not biting. Will is anxious at that; he has no desire to be serviced the same way he has served Hannibal twice now, and he is suddenly fearful too that he is being mocked - that Hannibal is flaunting his superior self-control in the face of Will's vulnerability. But whatever his intent, the nips turn to soft kisses quickly enough, then as Hannibal picks up speed they give over to a steady panting, just above Will's ear, and regardless Will is by then almost entirely lost in sensation.

Will reaches under his belly to take up his own cock. The blood loss is still working against him, and despite all desire and urgency it takes a painfully long time to jerk himself off, but Hannibal holds his own erection until after Will is finished.

Hannibal comes a few seconds later, sighing with relief.

"Stay there," Will says. "Just stay," and Hannibal does as he asks, stroking the edge of Will's cheek while they both catch their breath, but eventually he has to pull out.

When Hannibal does so the sense of loss is, for Will, profound. Will feels hollowed out and abandoned, though Hannibal is gone only a few seconds, depositing the used condom in the trash and the towel in the laundry hamper.

When he feels Hannibal settle back down on the bed beside him, Will finds himself on the verge of tears. He feels absurd and pathetic and somehow guilty in the face of his own reaction, and frightened of ruining something that had been so good, but it does not seem to register as outrageous or even unexpected to Hannibal, who curls in close to hold him and

says, “It’s alright. I’ve got you,” and the sense of devotion that floods through Will at that is, perhaps, the most astonishing thing of all.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a funny thing that's happened with these boys -

The closer they get to one another, the more difficult - and unnecessary, I think - it becomes to stick to one POV or the other. The degree to which they've come closer and closer to being of one mind in so many regards is especially stark in moments of physical and emotional intimacy, so I went with my instincts here and didn't divide shifts in point of view into different sections.

Hope that didn't throw anyone off and that this turned out okay.

ALSO, I'm in this place where I THINK I'm getting better at writing porn but then I'm also paranoid that like I am really bad at this and ppl just aren't saying anything bc they are embarrassed for me, so feedback/constructive crit is good for my anxious brain.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's game in the woods surrounding the little house, especially in the wetlands to the east, and Will goes into town with his false ID and registers for the necessary licenses under the name Rusty Shackleford, paying the fees, and in the course of the same trip returns with three different guns and more ammunition than Hannibal can imagine him ever possibly using up, no matter how long they stay here.

Will finds fowl of all kinds, over the course of that fall and winter - mourning doves and quail, pheasant, partridge, wild turkey, geese and half a dozen different species of duck. Rabbit and squirrel are ubiquitous, both in the woods and on their dinner table, and once Will returns with a raccoon that Hannibal is certain cannot possibly constitute proper food, but Will works some miracle with the slowcooker and the cat-like carcass, and when he is finished the result is one of the richest and most flavorful things that Hannibal ever tasted, the meat literally seeming to melt from the bones, and he finds himself going back for thirds. He feels it to be a real tragedy when it's all gone.

It the late fall there is venison to add to their freezer chest. A small bull elk, Will admits, but tells Hannibal that he'd found the animal's unusually dark pelt too intriguing for him to resist taking the shot. "I regretted it almost at once," he says, as Hannibal runs his fingers through the fur, which is an almost solid black instead of the usual tan and umber, "but someone else would have gotten him soon if I didn't." Will tans the hide and lays it at the end of their bed, and as the winter creeps in it keeps their feet warm.

Will presents each of these offerings to Hannibal whole, still pelted or befeathered and with only the minimal amount of necessary field dressing, so there can be no suspicion in his mind as to their province. As fall fades into winter, Hannibal realizes that much of his chronic anxiety about meat has faded into memory.

It is a pleasure to eat what Will brings him, and so much moreso when they cook it together.

The change is not lost on Will, who rolls up against Hannibal one night in bed and grabs his butt. "Your boney old ass isn't quite so damned boney anymore," he says, and his pride in this is evident.

Hannibal turns over onto his back and lifts his arm for Will to come closer, and Will slides down the mattress and rests his head on Hannibal's stomach. His stomach had been nearly concave when they came to the safe house, but there's some give to it now. "And you've got a little belly," he says, stroking the fuzzy skin right below Hannibal's navel.

He huffs at that. "I have an abdominal cavity with organs inside of it," Hannibal says, with more than a shade of annoyance. "And a certain amount of muscle and skin to keep said organs from falling out."

“You have a paunch, honey,” Will says, nuzzling his face against Hannibal’s bare skin. “And it is so soft and so *nice* .”

Will lifts his head to look at Hannibal, who is not warming to this discussion in the way that he’d hoped he might. He persists, though, forcing the kind boastful smile that can usually draw an exasperated flash of joy from Hannibal. “It’s because I’m such a good hunter.”

“I think it has more to do with the desserts than game,” Hannibal says, but without much spirit. There’s fear caught in his throat, thrashing there like a snared bird, and when he tries to swallow it down it only swells.

“Name a single recipe that isn’t improved by an extra stick of butter,” Will demands, still looking for a smile. When he doesn’t get one, he frowns worriedly and says, “What’s the matter?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“You can, Hannibal. You don’t have to if you don’t want to - but if it helps, you should. I’ll listen.”

Will studies his shadowed face, looking for some clue that might shine out through the dimness. He knows that he is on the wrong track, but he can’t help but ask, “You don’t think that I’m going to hurt you, do you?”

“No, Will. This is my problem - it doesn’t have anything to do with you.” But there’s a lie, hidden somewhere in those words, and despite all intentions Will feels stung.

He feels accused, and the knowledge that he has no defense for any of the things that he’s done - intentionally and not - to hurt Hannibal makes the guilt and shame rise in him, and they turn his tongue sharp. “Good. Because if you think I’ve gone through all of this just to fatten you up for slaughter, I don’t -”

Hannibal shoves him away.

He rises from the bed, and though his movements are unhurried and dignified this does not mean that Hannibal is not fleeing. He leaves their shared room and retreats into one of the spares.

It’s the one intended for Margot, and Hannibal locks the door behind himself and sits down on the edge of the mattress. He folds in over himself and holds his head in his hands, and tries to control his breathing.

It’s a long time before he has any success.

Will has a desire to follow after Hannibal, to keep the fight that has so blindsided him going by shouting at Hannibal and banging on the locked door. It is his instinct also to go down to kitchen and find some peace offering - cookies, maybe - to make up for being ugly and as leverage to open a discussion on what's going on inside Hannibal's mind.

These are his more gentle impulses.

He opts to give Hannibal - and himself - time and space instead.

Will takes himself down to the kitchen. He tries to sit quietly at the table, but anxiety makes his foot twitch and his hands shake, and eventually he gets up and behinds to root through the cupboards, looking for something to make.

When Hannibal finally comes looking for him, he finds Will at the stove. His back is to Hannibal and he doesn't turn around, though he knows that Will knows he's there.

Hannibal scents the air. "Why are you making pudding? It's the middle of the night."

"Because I've lost all control of my life, and if I want pudding I think I'm entitled to the indigence," Will says this without turning to look at Hannibal.

"I just had a panic attack. Another one. That never used to happen to me, so it must be because of you."

It is not exactly an accusation.

"That's called an anxiety disorder, Hannibal. I know you aren't ignorant as to your having that diagnosis. Alana put it in your file."

"No," Hannibal insists, "this is different. The more time I spend with you the more… raw everything I feel is. Everything is bigger and brighter, and I can't control it like I used to."

"Most people would say the fact that you're no longer suppressing most of your emotions constitutes progress."

"I like it most of the time. It's like you're bleeding into me, and most of the time I think that I wouldn't be able to live without feeling the way you make me feel, now that I know what it can be like. But I hate being the way I am right now - I can't stand how it is when we're angry with each other or the way that feeling frightens me."

"Guess I have a lot to atone for," Will says, opening the cupboard that holds the bowls. "Do you want any of this?"

"No."

Will puts two bowls on the table anyway, before sitting down. After a moment, Hannibal joins him at the table, though he doesn't touch the spoon.

"I'm going to be real honest with you, Hannibal," Will tells him, gesturing with his own spoon. "I have no earthly fucking idea what I even did."

Hannibal's gaze is stony. His upper lip twitches towards a snarl. "Don't talk about eating me - not as a joke or a threat or mockery."

“Fine. Good. Fair enough,” Will says, the concessions coming rapid fire. “Except that you were pissed at me before that. So what is the problem?”

Hannibal is not able to answer that question. He asks his own instead. “The first time I joined you at your table, you fed me meat from a person who you had killed.” He pauses, still too shaken to feel safe showing any weakness, but unable to find anyway to phrase the rest without showing vulnerability. “Why did you do that to me?”

Will watches him, blinking slowly. “I don’t think that you’ll believe me if I tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“I wasn’t out to get you, Hannibal - I never have been. It wasn’t meant to hurt or upset you or to make things difficult between us.” Will pauses, wets his lips. “I just… I liked you. And I wanted to take good care of you.”

“How does non-consensual cannibalism parse to you as 'taking care' of someone?”

“I don’t know, Hannibal. I never claimed to be a rational person, you know. It just felt that way - I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try,” Hannibal says, and his tone brooks no argument.

Will pushes his bowl of puddling away and forgets about it.

“I’m not sure I understand it completely myself,” Will insists, but he does his best to put inchoate instinct into words. “It’s like… I get so much of what I need from killing them… so if I eat the meat it's like I can get a little more of that from it, and I can show my respect to the ones who weren't real sonsofbitches by not wasting anything.

“And you were struggling so hard with yourself, Hannibal. It felt like if I gave you some of the meat, maybe you would get a little of the same peace of mind that the entire process gives me. And you really were too skinny.”

Will watches Hannibal chew on that. He doesn’t think that Hannibal really understands it, not on an emotional level, but Will hopes that he understands that he didn’t mean to hurt him.

He reaches across the table to take Hannibal’s hands, then he takes a chance. “I’m sorry I was such an ass, but can you tell me what it was that made you upset? I don’t want to make the mistake of doing it again.”

“It makes me feel like I’m in danger when people draw attention to my weight. And it makes me ashamed of myself. It doesn't matter if they are praising me or saying that I am too thin or that I am getting heavy.”

“A lot of people feel that way,” Will says carefully, knowing that whatever this is it is entirely different from more standard body image problems.

“That’s not what I mean,” he says, and Will feels Hannibal’s frustration building again, but Will handles it better this time. He doesn't let himself get angry in turn. “I like it, Will, if

you’re happy about how I look. That makes me glad.

“But I remembered…”

Will waits. He gives Hannibal time.

“I wanted to take care of her,” he says at last, an unconscious echo of Will’s own words. “They weren’t giving us much food - none at all, after a while - but I let Mischa have most of what there was, so she hadn’t dropped as much weight as I had.

“You were being so sweet to me, Will - I know you didn't mean anything but good by it - but you were touching me and talking about my weight, and I remember the way the men crowded in on us to pinch our cheeks and limbs, and how I could see something speculative in their hungry eyes.

"They pretended to be so cheerful about it,” he goes on. “One of them said, ‘she’s still got her baby fat,’ and another agreed and said, ‘she’s a chubby little thing’ and touched the tip of her nose. Mischa tried to bite him, when he did that, but it didn't make any difference - they thought it was funny.

“She wasn’t chubby, of course - none of us were, by then, not even the one who had been fat. But I’d been in a growth spurt even before all of this started - my mother was always fussing about how I ate so much but that it just seemed to disappear. By then I was a dry stick compared to Mischa.

“That’s why they took her instead of me.”

Hannibal sees everything click into place for Will. “Christ,” he says, and Hannibal reads Will’s shock as condemnation. Condemnation is what he has been expecting, all this time. His eyes start to burn.

Will sees the pain pass across Hannibal’s face. He rushes to smother it.

“Listen to me, Hannibal - listen closely, alright? I had every piece of information that you were in possession of at the time and then some, and I had a lot more experience and time to think about how those pieces fit together, and I didn't see it coming.

“I knew that the men you were trapped with were as dangerous as mad dogs, and I knew that you know what human flesh tastes like, and I knew that your sister didn’t make it out alive. And Hannibal, I know about the ugly things that there are in the world. I’ve heard a thousand stories of suffering and abuse and cruelty from my patients, and I have done terrible things and I have drawn confessions from men who make me look innocent in comparison.

“I spent so much time trying to figure out what happened. I thought that you might eventually tell me that you uncovered the body of the cook or of one of the people who died in the initial avalanche, and that was what you were all driven by starvation to eat. At worst, I thought, the men had turned against one another or else drawn lots and killed one of their own.

“And I considered the possibility that one of them had killed Mischa in anger, or that there had been an accident, or that she just got sick, though I knew that you were lying when you told me that last part, so I’d discarded that idea.

“I thought and I thought about this, but it never once, at any point, occurred to me that a group of grown men would agree to kill and butcher a little girl, and then actually follow through with it. Not for any reason whatsoever.”

Hannibal flinches at that those words, put so baldly. He tries to pull away but Will holds onto his hands and squeezes them tightly. “You couldn’t have predicted what would happened.”

“I know,” Hannibal says. “But that doesn’t make any difference. I was supposed to take care of her and I made her a target instead, and then I couldn’t protect her. I couldn’t stop them when they took her and -

“Will, I remember her screaming for me, but I couldn’t -”

Hannibal’s throat works. “But that isn't all of it,” he says, and Will finds himself suddenly terrified that if Hannibal continues - if he tells Will the rest of it - that he will not be able to live with the knowledge that Will knows what he did, that that knowledge will ruin what they have together, maybe even make Hannibal dangerous to him.

"You can stop if you need to," Will says, but Hannibal goes on as though he hadn't spoke.

“They needed me to break the tunnel for them. They said, ‘You have to eat or you’ll die.’ ‘You have to keep up your strength or you will never leave this place.’

“And I wanted out, Will. It smelled so badly - like a reeking stool pit, and like her blood.

“So I did. I took what they gave me, knowing what it was, and I ate it.

"When I gave her the extra food I didn't know that I was putting her in danger and I couldn't have save her once they decided what they were going to do, but I had a choice about the rest - even if it was just to fight them until they gave up trying to make me take the soup or got fed up enough to killed me. I had a choice, and I made it, and I can't take it back.

“I ate her.”

Even with all his training, there is so little that Will can actually do to help lift such an incredible burden of guilt and shame and horror. He holds Hannibal’s hands in his own and he sits with him, quietly - waiting.

It takes a long time for the tears to start, and once they begin it seems to Will that they might never end. It’s not the simple, unashamed tears that Hannibal is so prone towards when something moves him to joy or sorrow. These are great, voiceless sobs that rack his entire body in nearly silent grief, and that grief gets inside of Will and he cries with Hannibal, unable to stop himself.

Eventually, Will is able to lead him back up to their bedroom, where Hannibal breaks down again as soon as he sits on the edge of the bed. Will sits down beside him and he draws Hannibal’s head and shoulders down into his lap. He rocks Hannibal gently and runs his fingers through Hannibal’s hair until the crying has stilled, and when that happens Will slips away to wet a washcloth in icy cold water.

He brings the rag to Hannibal and tells him, “Press that against your eyes - it’ll take some of the sting away,” and Hannibal takes the cloth and holds it in his hand, and he looks up at Will with such a depth of gratitude that Will feels his own eyes welling up again, but from shame this time, because he can think of nothing that he has done or could possibly do to be deserving of such naked love and devotion.

Will remembers putting his hand on the small of Hannibal’s back and feeling his body convulse as he retched what Will had given him up into the kitchen sink, right before Will used the needle on him, and he wonders - not for the first time or the last - how it is that Hannibal can stomach being near him.

Chapter End Notes

So I said to myself, "Self, you have at least two readers who really like to read about Hannibal's tum, so why don't you sit down and write 800 words of cute chubby Hannibal fluff, and then you will have something nice to give people, and you can get back to your thesis work."

Nearly 3k words later, having burned through the night and having successfully made myself cry with my own writing, which has never happened before, not even when I write Really Sad Shit *coughSilverSpringscough*, we have... whatever this is.

I'm really sorry.

PS, there's at least two references to decade+ old cartoons buried in here among everything else. I don't know why, I just felt compelled.

PPS, this story has gotten a lot longer than I expected it would be at this point in the narrative, and I am thinking of breaking it into two separate stories (this is something I have been going back and forth on from the start). That's why the chapter count has suddenly dropped so dramatically p I haven't cut anything, just moved a lot of it to Part Five.

Chapter 13

Occasionally, Will makes vague noises about moving on - getting Hannibal false papers and leaving the country for some new place, a distant point on the globe that has long summers and no extradition treaty with the United States.

“Cuba?” Will suggests, and Hannibal has to laugh at the thought of Will, with his ostentatious taste and his tendency to retreat into aristocratic swagger when challenged, passing the time of day out on the fishing docks with the old revolutionaries.

Hannibal does nothing to encourage these brief conversations to transition from anything but idle talk.

There is no reason, he believes, to risk flight across open territory when they are so thoroughly dug in here. He knows this can not be sustainable in the long term, but for the time beginning it strikes him as their safest option, and when he raises the question Will agrees with that assessment.

Mainly, though, Hannibal simply doesn’t wish to leave. Their lives are small and insular here, for Hannibal even more so than Will, reduced down to the making good food and walks in the woods and one another’s company, but they are so at home wandering inside of one another that it hardly seems to matter.

When spring comes Hannibal starts a garden.

Will hardly thinks about killing at all.

It’s better that Hannibal not be seen, and Will makes the shopping runs, which given their isolation often take the better part of a day, alone.

He worries about Hannibal’s well-being, sometimes. It’s not especially healthy, Will knows, for Hannibal to have no other human interaction but with himself, and he frets over the possibility that being so isolated might cause him to fall into depression. He's also concerned that cabin fever might set in or that Hannibal might come to resent Will’s relative freedom.

But Hannibal seems unfazed. He is, Will supposes, entirely too used to being alone. Will seems to be the only thing he needs to sate himself.

When the Will returns from the post office with the box of baby chicks they ordered, he and Hannibal open it to find one of them lying limply on its side apart from the other chicks, which are huddled together comfortably around the heatpack. The chick, which is one of the silkies Hannibal asked for, pants rapidly, its small fluffy chest a fury of movement.

“Well shit,” Will curses, and bites his lower lip as he slides his eyes towards Hannibal, watching him watching the little bird. “What’s the first thing you feel, looking at something

like that?"

Hannibal is cagey. "What am I expected to feel?" he asks, and Will isn't sure if Hannibal is hiding what he suspects to be not enough emotion or too much of the wrong sort. It's as possible that he fears looking sentimental as much as it is that he's worried about being calloused.

"Oh honey," Will sighs. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

"Let me ask a different question; what do we do about this problem?"

That answer is easier. "Keep it warm and make sure that it's taking water, and then wait and see. It might live."

The answer pleases Will, and he likes it even better that Hannibal takes on the task himself, tending to the runty chick with a cautious practicality.

Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed and runs his fingers through Will's bedhead. There's just enough length to his hair now for Hannibal to get a good grip when the spirit takes him.

His own hair is growing, too, and Hannibal ties it back as often as not. Absent his concerns about standing out as unusual in the eyes of other men, especially FBI agents, Hannibal feels his own mannerisms growing softer and more flowing. He feels looser inside his own body, and rarely these days does he move with the old rigid control to which he has subjected himself in the past.

Some of this he has picked up from Will, but far from all. He feels good; more like himself than he has ever been, and more comfortable with that self, too.

Now he leans in to speak softly into Will's ear. "If you ever cut your hair that short again I won't be responsible for my actions."

Will huffs, feigning outrage. "You just want to be able to yank me around."

"Can't get anything past you, can I?" Hannibal grouses, but it is a source of wonder and great pride for him, the extent to which Will has come to trust his touch, even when it is not entirely gentle. He is still fragile, apt to crack in ways that might cut them both if not handled with caution and care, but the threshold for what Will can handle - what he is able to allow himself to enjoy - without sliding into panic is so much more forgiving.

And Will hardly ever bites Hannibal without meaning to these days, though often Hannibal asks for it. Crescent-shaped scars intersect one another across his shoulders and the back of his neck like foreign script, the meaning of which even Hannibal himself cannot quite translate. Hannibal often admires the way in which he has been marked, studying the scars and the fresher bites in the mirror. As the spring extends out before them, Hannibal begins to tan, the benefit of so much time working and lounging out of doors without his shirt, and he adores the contrast of the pale pinkness of the scars against the new golden hue of his skin.

Now, Will leans his head against Hannibal's shoulder and shows him his cellphone. "Dolarhyde dodged the needle," he says, nodding towards the screen. "They're sending him to BSHCI."

Hannibal's first thought is, *If it was me I'd rather be dead* , but he worries that might upset or worry Will. He says instead, "Prison is better. They tell you when you're getting out, even if the answer is 'never,' and unless they really nailed you for something you just have to keep your nose clean and you can get reduced time.

"A place like the BSHCI is entirely arbitrary. It might be five years or fifteen or the rest of your life, but they never give you a number, and it's all subject to the whims of the people in authority, who aren't just asking for you to stay out of trouble but who want an extended demonstration that there's been a fundamental switch in how you interact with the world."

Will nods. "I'm inclined to agree. Chilton, the man in charge down at the BSHCI? He's a laughing stock. Utterly incompetent. He'd never be allowed to preside over so many patients if the idea that any of them will actually receive anything approaching treatment was anything other than a pretext."

He pauses, considering if he should go on. Patient-doctor confidentiality with people he will never see again seems a bit silly, given their situation, but it is his instinct to be careful.

"I have an ex-patient who works there. He's a funny young man - rather narcissistic but exuberantly friendly, too. It's been awhile since I've last spoken to him, but he was extremely earnest in his belief that the inmates there have been treated badly, especially in regards to their degree of isolation. It's something he has firsthand knowledge about, too, though in a different facility, so I wouldn't discount his views."

"They don't let former inmates work at places like that, surely?"

Will's smile is sly. "That's nothing a nice set of fake IDs and a new identity can't get around."

"Just how much trouble have you gotten up to, over the years?"

"I look out for my patients," Will says, primly. "And don't make that face at me," he adds.

"I'm not making any kind of face," Hannibal says, and his upper lip twitches with a ghost of annoyance.

"Yes, you are. You're wondering if you should be jealous. It's nothing like that - he's ten years younger than me."

"Ah, is that an infeasible age gap all of a sudden?"

"It depends. Matthew was hardly a boy when he was under my care, so that's very different. I couldn't imagine being attracted to him romantically or sexually."

Will frowns, vaguely troubled with himself. "I don't think I would have done this either," he says, gesturing vaguely between the two of them, "as much as I might have wanted to and as

happy as I am that we have, if things had gone as planned. I never intended to be more than an a friend to you, Hannibal, but circumstances... And you were very insistent."

"I was," Hannibal says, proudly. Then he frowns, thinking. “I wonder what difference it made in Dolarhyde’s trial, our having not been there.”

“Dunno,” Will says. He stands up from bed to stretch. “Let’s find some breakfast, yeah?”

Hannibal catches him by the arm, draws him back towards the bed. "What if I insisted that you stay right here?"

Calling Margot to check in on Beth almost always brings some news of the boy, as Hannibal hoped it would from the start. They’ve bonded, Thomas and Beth, and not much time passed before Hannibal realized that the window of opportunity for getting his little hound back was closing. By now, more than four months since he handed her over to Margot, it’s essentially unthinkable - it would be viewed as cruel to both the dog and the boy to separate them at this point.

He accepts that; it’s worth the sacrifice to have a shot at being the go-between that mends Will and Margot’s friendship. He thinks also, that Beth is probably happier with a child to play with, and that it’s good that the boy has a loyal dog to watch over him.

Neither he nor Margot broach this topic, though. It might mean a foreclosure of their discussions, a thing that neither of them want. He’s started to like Margot for her own sake, too, and to look forward to their conversations for his own pleasure.

They were speaking together on a more or less weekly basis for about a month when Margot began asking if he was sure that he was safe, there alone with Will - a line of inquiry that he found touching if misguided. Another month went by before she accepted his assertions that he did not fear Will and was in no danger.

She asks after Will’s well-being now, almost every week. She hasn’t asked to speak with him directly, and Hannibal has not pushed her, but he thinks that is coming soon.

“Good,” he tells her now. “Everything’s fine here. We have chickens now.” He takes a gamble; a semi-personal question with no pretext other than to simply chat. “Do you like chickens?”

“Are you trying to dump more animals on me?” she demands, and it is at least half a joke, which is, Hannibal feels, promising. “I’m not familiar with them.”

This is genuinely astonishing to Hannibal. “But you live on a farm.”

“I live near an industrial swine production operation, which I have never had anything to do with directly,” Margot corrects him. “Go ask Will what the word ‘monoculture’ means. I’ll wait.”

Hannibal, who understands the term perfectly well and could speak at length on its pros and cons, indulges her. It is the first time she has made such a request.

He goes down stairs, the cellphone in hand, and relays the question to Will.

The hope lights up Will's eyes when he hears that Margot wants to speak with him, even vicariously, but he tries to give a clever answer. He speaks loudly, though not conspicuously so, and Hannibal holds the phone facing him. "That's when your grandaddy just about wrecks the land by making the Black folks grow nothing but cotton for twenty plus years, since that's what brings in the most money, and never mind how it depletes the soil or the blood, sweat and tears the sharecroppers have to put into it, and then you have to spend the next two generations just trying to fix the damage."

Hannibal turns the phone back to his ear. "Will says -"

"I heard what he said," Margot says, "and don't let him fool you - he hasn't spent more than an hour in his entire life seriously considering the care and management of his family's crop lands. He's got people who do that for him," and despite her words Hannibal is sure - is almost entirely certain - that there's a note of happiness in her voice at having heard Will's.

The sickly chick never really catches up to his peers, but he lives. He grows to be a bedraggled little thing, undersized and lacking in dignity, but seems to recall Hannibal as his caretaker from those early days, because he calls out loudly and runs to him whenever he spots Hannibal in the yard, regardless of if he has food with him or not.

Hannibal is not demonstrative about the bird, one way or the other. He doesn't show the little rooster any special sort of affection, at least not when Will is watching, but he makes sure that the bigger birds don't crowd him out from getting his fair share of feed.

When he sees them together, Will smiles.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There comes a day when Will's customary trip into town runs hours longer than expected.

Hannibal waits anxiously for him to return, and is further unnerved by just how uneasy the delay makes him feel.

He doesn't think Will has been dwelling overly much on killing these past six months, if at all, but Hannibal also knows that if Will saw something that sufficiently outraged him he might have made a detour.

Hannibal tries to busy himself in the garden, but he can not shake the fear that Will might have gotten into trouble, that he has been hurt or caught or taken.

That Will has, against all evidence, decided to leave.

He can not be angry when Will returns at last. Hannibal meets him in the drive and crowds in on Will before he has even gotten out from behind the wheel, wanting to be close to him - to touch him, to reassure himself that Will is well and whole and back with him again.

"You're worse than a puppy dog," Will says, but he lets Hannibal draw him into his arms and hold him for a time.

The worry starts to close in on Will again, the suspicion that he's somehow conned his way into a love that he doesn't deserve and cannot fully reciprocate, not to the extent or with the single-purposed purity that Hannibal loves him.

Will does the best he can. Lately, at least, that doesn't feel quite as deficient as he feared it might be.

When he starts to feel too antsy, he pushes Hannibal away gently and reaches into the back of the SUV for the bags. Hannibal reaches to take them from his hands and Will lets him, and then he follows Hannibal inside, walking a few steps behind.

While Hannibal's back is turned, Will takes the ring box from his pocket and puts it on the kitchen table. He steps back from it, then, as though it is a snake with a bite of unknown toxicity.

Hannibal sees it on the table at once, small thing though it is.

"What's that?" he asks, and his voice is almost suspicious.

"I had thought…" Will begins. "Well. If you want it, there it is."

"Are you proposing to me, Will?"

“Yes,” he says, after a pause. And then he seeks refuge in practicalities. “We couldn’t have a ceremony, not for a while, anyway, but -”

Hannibal is shaking his head, and in the time it takes Will to parse what he’s actually saying his heart drops down into his belly and tries to crowd in behind his liver. “You’ll do it correctly,” Hannibal says.

Will swallows. “I’m really nervous,” he admits. Then, awkwardly and with a great deal of trepidation, he scoops the box up off the table and takes a knee before Hannibal.

“I confess that I don’t really understand what it is that you see in me,” begins, and it is hard to hold eye contact with Hannibal, when such an astonishingly bright glow of delighted vindication burns in his gaze, “but if you'll have me, Hannibal, I’m yours.”

He says yes, of course, and when Will has slipped the silver band over his finger, Hannibal pulls him up to his feet and draws him into a long kiss.

It’s all too good to last.

Chapter End Notes

Who remembers when this AU was going to be like five chapters long?

80k+ words later, this particular story but not the series. The first chapter of the next (and, I THINK, anyway) last story in this AU will be up as soon as possible.

Chapter 15

Forgot to make an announcement here, but the new story in this series is up at this link and is currently on chapter five.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!